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**Imperialism's Stepchild: Dura-Europos and the Political Uses of Archaeology in the French  
Mandate of Syria, 1920–1939**

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April 12, 2021

A Senior Thesis Presented to the History Department in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

## *Table of Contents*

<b>Figures</b>	1
<b>Chronology</b>	2
<b>Introduction</b>	3
<i>Chronology</i>	6
<b>“European Islands Lost in an Asiatic Ocean”: French Political Uses of Archaeology</b>	9
<i>Archaeology as Physical Control</i>	11
<i>Archaeology as Profit</i>	17
<i>Archaeology, Allochrony, and Colonial Legitimization</i>	22
<b>“Syrians, Remember Your Forefathers”: Syrian Political Uses of Archaeology</b>	33
<i>Local Encounters with Antiquity</i>	33
<i>Destruction as Resistance</i>	39
<i>Reclaiming Ancient History</i>	42
<i>Pushback from Arab Nationalism</i>	51
<b>Conclusion</b>	55
<b>Bibliographical Essay</b>	58
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	63
<b>Bibliography</b>	64

## *Figures*

Figure 1: Map of the French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon	8
Figure 2: Old village of Tadmor built on and among the ruins of Palmyra	15
Figure 3: Aerial map of ruins of Palmyra	16
Figure 4: Bedouin woman using a handmill	24
Figure 5: Workers resting by the Gate of Palmyra at Dura-Europos	25
Figure 6: Young boy living near the Dura-Europos site	25
Figure 7: Michael Rostovtzeff and Franz Cumont posing by the Mithraeum	26
Figure 8: Foreman Sheikh Hamoudi Ibn Ibrahim and Leonard Woolley	36
Figure 9: Full work team from Harald Ingholt's dig at Hama	36
Figure 10: Al-'Azm Palace during the Great Syrian Revolt	41
Figure 11: The synagogue of Dura-Europos at the National Museum of Damascus	44

## *Chronology*

- 303 BCE:** Founding of Dura-Europos by Seleucus I Nicator
- 113 BCE:** Conquest of Dura-Europos by Parthians
- 64 BCE:** Incorporation of the province of Roman Syria into the Roman Empire
- 256 CE:** Conquest of Dura-Europos by Sassanid king Shapur I
- 1914–1918:** World War I
- March 1920:** Proclamation of Faisal as king of Syria
- March 1920:** Discovery of wall paintings at Dura-Europos by British soldiers from India
- April 1920:** San Remo conference creating British and French mandates in the Middle East
- July 1920:** Ouster of King Faisal by the French military
- 1922–1923:** French excavation at Dura-Europos under Franz Cumont
- 1923:** Ratification of the French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon
- 1925–1927:** Great Syrian Revolt
- 1928:** Founding of the National Bloc
- 1928:** Start of American excavation at Dura-Europos under Michael Rostovtzeff
- 1929:** Start of French excavation at Ugarit under Claude Schaeffer
- 1929:** Start of French excavation at Palmyra under Henri Seyrig
- 1929:** Resumption of German excavation at Tell Halaf under Max von Oppenheim
- 1931:** Start of Danish excavation at Hama under Harald Ingholt
- 1931:** Appointment of Clark Hopkins as field director at Dura-Europos
- 1932:** Founding of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party
- 1933:** Founding of the League of National Action
- 1933:** Start of French excavation at Mari by Louvre team
- 1937:** Start of British excavation at Tell Atshana under Leonard Woolley
- 1939–1945:** World War II
- 1945:** *De jure* Syrian independence
- 1946:** Evacuation of last French troops from Syria

## Introduction

“Let me take you for a moment to the Syrian desert, and the right bank of the Middle Euphrates.”<sup>1</sup> At a half-dozen lectures during the 1930s spanning two continents, several countries, and multiple languages, Yale classics professor Michael Rostovtzeff would commence his talk with some variation of this same sentence.<sup>2</sup> He would proceed to describe the Yale-led excavation of the ancient Syrian city of Dura-Europos, inviting the listener to delve into a world of miraculous finds, hauntingly beautiful desert landscapes, and ruins illuminating the arc of both Western and Eastern civilization.

Rostovtzeff undertook his speaking tour at a time when archaeology in the Middle East was undergoing a revival. Under the auspices of French and British authorities in modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq, Western archaeologists poured into the region during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>3</sup> In explaining the popularity of Middle Eastern archaeology at the time, Jotham Johnson — a Yale graduate student working at the Dura-Europos site — declared, “The Outer World [of non-archaeologists] believes that archaeology is a profession of romance, of stately caravans in far-off lands, of exciting discoveries, of leisurely study. The Outer World is not far wrong.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Notes for “Dura-Europos on the Euphrates,” Box 30, Folder 186, Michael Ivanovich Rostovtzeff Papers (MS 1133), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Rostovtzeff (1870–1952) was a Russian-born ancient historian who served as the Sterling Professor of Ancient History and Archaeology at Yale University from 1925 until his retirement in 1944. He served as President of the American Historical Association in 1935 and is best known for his 1926 magnum opus, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*. For more information on Rostovtzeff’s life and career, see Joseph G. Manning, ed., *Writing History in Times of War: Michael Rostovtzeff, Elias Bickerman and the “Hellenization of Asia”* (Stuttgart, Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015), <https://elibrary.steiner-verlag.de/book/99.105010/9783515109536>.

<sup>3</sup> Salam Al Quntar, “Repatriation and the Legacy of Colonialism in the Middle East,” *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology & Heritage Studies* 5, no. 1 (2017): 19. Accessed March 14, 2021. doi:10.5325/jeasmedarcherstu.5.1.0019.

<sup>4</sup> Jotham Johnson, “‘A Trade for Halliburton.’ Archaeology the Adventurous, as Viewed by One Whose Present Address Is ‘Fouilles de Doura-Europos, Salihyeh Euphrate, Syria,’” *Princeton Alumni Weekly* 29, 1929, 741.

In reality, the world of Syrian archaeology during the French mandate was less romantic and more political than either Rostovtzeff or Johnson expressed. Although both men filled their writing with many of the orientalist tropes that pervaded Western art and academia at the time, recent postcolonial literature has moved away from cultural explanations for this spike in interest and instead has expanded exploration of the relationship between archaeology and imperialism.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary archaeologists posited their work as purely academic, but their projects were closely aligned with the British and French mandate regimes controlling the Levant at the time. Not only did archaeologists work under mandate governments, but they actively used their work “to construct the non-West, to forge a cultural lineage to the West, and to separate opposing identities.”<sup>6</sup> Modern scholars have therefore termed archaeology the “stepchild of imperialism” — not just associated but inextricably tied to the political goals of French and British colonial powers.<sup>7</sup>

The use of archaeology for political purposes has been well documented in neighboring British mandates such as Palestine and Iraq and even in post-independence Syrian history.<sup>8</sup> But the politics of archaeology under the French mandate for Syria and the Lebanon — especially the attitudes of Syrians themselves — has only recently begun to receive the same scrutiny. This paper aims to highlight the diversity of perspectives of all those involved in Syrian archaeology

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Said encapsulates orientalism in the introduction to his seminal 1978 work, *Orientalism*, in which he states, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.” Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, First Vintage books edition (New York: Vintage, 1979), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Laurence Gillot, “Towards a Socio-Political History of Archaeology in the Middle East: The Development of Archaeological Practice and Its Impacts on Local Communities in Syria,” *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, 20 (2010): 4, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/bha.20102>.

<sup>7</sup> Zainab Baharani, “Conjuring Mesopotamia: Imaginative Geography and a World Past” in *Archaeology Under Fire: Nationalism, Politics and Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East*, ed. Lynn Meskell (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 159–174; Donald Malcolm Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?: Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>8</sup> For an in-depth examination of the creation of a Syrian national identity after independence, see Stéphane Valter, *La construction nationale syrienne: légitimation de la nature communautaire du pouvoir par le discours historique*, (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2002).

and discourse surrounding Syria's ancient history during the French mandate, from French political and cultural authorities and Western archaeologists who came to Syria to excavate, to local laborers at excavations and the indigenous populations these excavations displaced, to Syrian and Arab nationalists debating Syria's past and future and insurgent leaders who used historical rhetoric to rebel against the mandatory regime.

During the time of the French mandate in Syria in the 1920s and 1930s, both French government officials *and* Syrian nationalists fought to establish competing claims of political legitimacy by using the country's archaeological sites and ancient history. French government officials — and the Western archaeologists they worked with — used archaeological sites to control space and to give a justification for the *mission civilisatrice* to French and other foreign audiences.<sup>9</sup> This approach alienated many Syrian audiences in the early years of the mandate, leading to the occasional destruction of ancient artifacts. In the mandate's second decade, Syrian nationalists began to insist on local sovereignty over archaeology, thereby using ancient history as a way to bring together Syrians across social divides and to legitimize their struggle for a political unit encompassing all of Greater Syria. But they were often undermined by the opposing rhetoric of Arab nationalists and the rigidity of French institutions, and so Syrian nationalists ended up unable to assert indigenous control over archaeology to the same extent as in neighboring countries like Iraq, which had greater local sovereignty and a more coherent nationalist ideology.

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<sup>9</sup> The *mission civilisatrice*, or “civilizing mission,” was the ideology underpinning much of French and other European imperial expansion at the time. Matthew Burrows, “‘Mission Civilisatrice’: French Cultural Policy in the Middle East, 1860-1914,” *The Historical Journal* 29, no. 1 (1986): 109-35, accessed April 9, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639258>.



## *Chronology*

Many empires have laid claim to the land that is now Syria. Over the course of the second and third millennia BCE, various parts of Syria came under the control of a series of Semitic and Mesopotamian civilizations, including the Sumerians, Eblaites, Akkadians, Hitties, and Babylonians.<sup>10</sup> In the first millennium BCE, the Canaanite and Phoenician civilizations occupied the Syrian coast, while the Arameans and Assyrians dominated the interior. Syria then fell under the sway of successive Persian and Hellenistic empires, including the Achaemenids, Seleucids, and Parthians. After Pompey the Great's conquest of Antioch in 64 BCE, Syria became a Roman province, although the Romans endured both domestic resistance from local leaders like Zenobia of Palmyra and foreign challenges from the Sassanian Empire until the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476, which brought an end to what most scholars deem "ancient history."<sup>11</sup>

This diversity of peoples and cultures is visible in the ruins of ancient Syrian cities like Dura-Europos and Palmyra, where archaeologists have stumbled upon artifacts and structures melding the artistic and architectural styles of distinct civilizations. Dura-Europos, for example, was founded at the end of the fourth century BCE by the Greek Seleucus I Nicator, a general of Alexander the Great. The city came under the control of Parthians from modern-day Iran in 113 BCE, and Parthians held the city until Syria came under Roman rule in 64 BCE. After a long siege, Dura-Europos fell in 256 CE to the Sassanid king Shapur I, who deported its surviving population and abandoned the city itself. Even the name Dura-Europos — a modern amalgam — brings together the names of the site from these different cultures.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cyril John Gadd and William L. Ochenwald, "History," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed April 9, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria/Media-and-publishing#ref29902>.

<sup>11</sup> For more detail on Zenobia's life and her role in the Western imagination, see Rex Winsbury, *Zenobia of Palmyra: History, Myth and the Neo-Classical Imagination* (London: Duckworth, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> "Europos" was the original Greek name of the colony, while "Dura" comes from the Assyrian word for "fortress." The debate about when and under whom the city had which name is ongoing. Jennifer Baird, *Dura-Europos* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 7, 19.

After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, Syria was a cornerstone of the Byzantine Empire until its conquest by Muslim Arabs in the seventh century. During four centuries of Ottoman rule starting in 1516, Syria was divided into several *wilayets*, or provinces, ruled from Istanbul and usually with limited local autonomy.<sup>13</sup> After the collapse of the Ottoman empire at the end of the First World War, the Hashemite King Faisal briefly ruled Syria. The French military ousted him in the summer of 1920, after the victorious Allies delegated authority over the Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon to France at the San Remo Conference.<sup>14</sup>

The imposition of the French mandate was met with hostility from much of the Syrian population. From 1925 to 1927, the Great Syrian Revolt brought together Sunni, Druze, Alawite, Christian, and Shia groups across economic classes and regional boundaries against the French mandate in a mass insurrection eventually put down brutally by French forces. Around the same time, nationalist political parties began to form, including the National Bloc in 1928, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party in 1932, and the League of National Action in 1933.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Onn Winckler, Joseph Ginat, and Moshe Ma'oz, *Modern Syria: From Ottoman Rule to Pivotal Role in the Middle East* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Differing from colonies, mandates were created by the League of Nations and were meant to be a temporary form of administration. According to Matz, “two elements formed the core of the Mandate System: the principle of non-annexation of the territory on the one hand and its administration as a ‘sacred trust of civilisation’ on the other. While these considerations addressed some problems, e.g. the general restriction of the powers of the Mandatories, they raised others, particularly with regard to who had sovereignty over the territory.” For more on the mandate system, see Nele Matz, “Civilization and the Mandate System under the League of Nations as Origin of Trusteeship,” *Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law Online* 9, 1 (2005): 47-95, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/187574105X00039>.

<sup>15</sup> Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 79; Adel Beshara (ed.), *Antun Sa'adeh: The Man, His Thought: an Anthology* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1999), 2; David Kenneth Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 277.

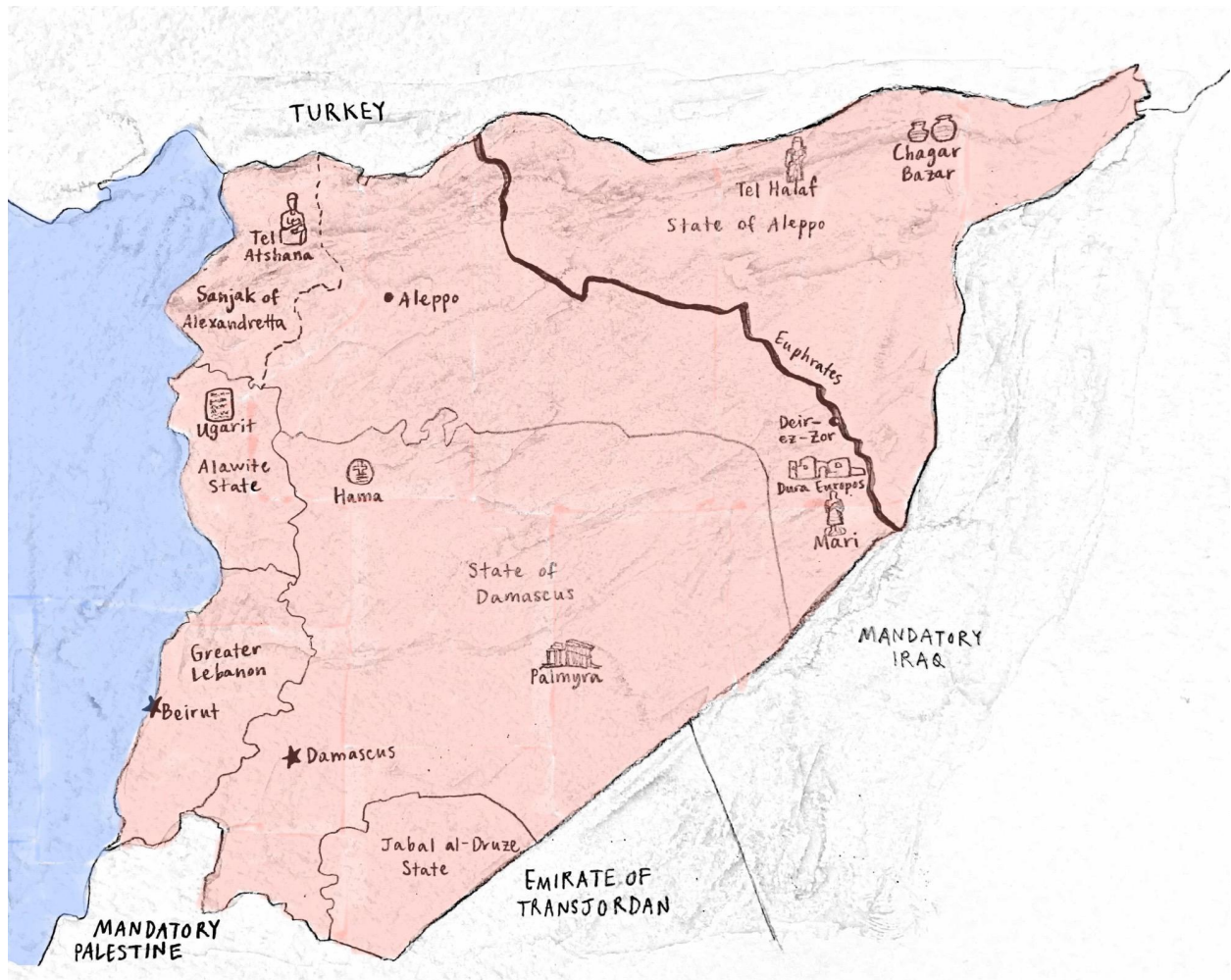


Figure 1: Map of the French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon. The mandate was divided into several territories, each with a regional government, although the entire mandate fell under the purview of the French High Commissioner of the Levant and institutions like Service des Antiquités. The main excavations discussed in this paper are shown. Map created by Laura Bussemaker.

During the time of the French mandate, several major excavations took place. This paper will focus on the excavation of the city of Dura-Europos, which the French government started in 1922 with Belgian archaeologist Franz Cumont at the helm. After the Great Syrian Revolt, the French gave permission for a Yale-led excavation at the same site under Rostovtzeff's

leadership.<sup>16</sup> Among the other digs that took place, the best known was the excavation of the ancient Semitic city of Palmyra, which began in 1929 under the supervision of Henri Seyrig.<sup>17</sup> Excavation of the Canaanite port city of Ugarit began in 1929 under French archaeologist Claude Schaeffer, and a team of archaeologists from the Louvre excavated the Sumerian site of Mari near the Iraqi border starting in 1933.<sup>18</sup> The French mandate government also actively encouraged foreign excavations compared to its neighbors.<sup>19</sup> There were thirteen foreign-led digs in Syria by 1936, including excavations at Tell Halaf by German scholar Max von Oppenheim in the northeast, Tell Atshana in the northwest by the British Leonard Woolley, and Hama in the east by the Danish Harald Ingholt between 1931 and 1939.<sup>20</sup>

### **“European Islands Lost in an Asiatic Ocean”: French Political Uses of Archaeology**

From the beginning, French political authorities knew that establishing their political legitimacy and authority over the country would be difficult. As in other French colonies, the mandatory regime relied mainly on two strategies: the cooptation of local elites and a strategy of “divide and rule” that attempted to weaken the nationalist movement by separating the nation’s diverse regions.<sup>21</sup> These strategies alone proved insufficient. At the end of the Great Syrian Revolt, French High Commissioner Henri Ponsot wrote back to Paris that “we must seize this occasion and choose: either we continue to practice a policy based above all on our military force, or we make a definite attempt to come to terms with the nationalist opposition and let it

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<sup>16</sup> Yale University Art Gallery, “Dura-Europos: Excavating Antiquity,” accessed April 9, 2021, <http://media.artgallery.yale.edu/duraeuropos/dura.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Seyrig also led the excavation of Seleucid-founded Emesa, or modern-day Homs in western Syria. Michel Al-Maqdissi, (ed.), *Pionniers et protagonistes de l’archéologie syrienne, 1860–1960. D’Ernest Renan à Sélim Abdulhak* (Ministère de la Culture, D.G.A.M., Damas: Documents d’Archéologie Syrienne XIV), 142.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Maqdissi, *Pionniers et protagonistes de l’archéologie syrienne*, 191.

<sup>19</sup> James F. Goode, *Negotiating for the Past: Archaeology, Nationalism, and Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1919-1941* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 220.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Maqdissi, *Pionniers et protagonistes de l’archéologie syrienne*, 59, 96, 153.

<sup>21</sup> Winckler, Ginat, and Ma’oz, *Modern Syria*, 2.

eventually come to power.”<sup>22</sup> Recognizing this weakness and perceived illegitimacy of the mandatory government, the French used every tool at their disposal to warrant their presence in Syria to both the local population and the French public back home — including archaeology.

This strategy of legitimization built upon the infrastructure that the French state developed in its colonization of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, which relied upon institutions like the Service des Antiquités, Beaux-Arts, et Monuments Historiques to excavate Roman ruins and reconstruct North African cities to mirror French urbanism.<sup>23</sup> A wave of antiquity-related institutions came into being during the mandate, such as the Institut d’Art et d’Archéologie Islamique (Institute of Islamic Art and Archaeology) in 1918, the Service des Antiquités (Department of Antiquities) and the Mission Archéologique Permanente (Standing Archaeological Commission) in 1919, and the Institut Français des Études Arabes de Damas (French Institute of Arabic Studies of Damascus) in 1930.<sup>24</sup>

With this wide array of organizations, the government managed for more than a decade to keep a tight grip on all archaeological work that took place on Syrian soil and thereby control the narrative that emerged from such excavation. In doing so, the French employed the practice of archaeology in several ways: controlling physical space, asserting military dominance, answering for the cost of the mandatory project by sending valuable artifacts to the metropole, and justifying the French civilizing mission by presenting the history of European civilization and Christianity in Syria. This politicization of archaeology relied upon both French-led digs and excavations led by foreigners like the Yale team at Dura-Europos, who contributed to French

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<sup>22</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 264.

<sup>23</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, “Tradition in the Service of Modernity: Architecture and Urbanism in French Colonial Policy, 1900-1930,” *The Journal of Modern History* 59, no. 2 (1987): 300, accessed April 10, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1879728>.

<sup>24</sup> Gillot, “Towards a Socio-Political History of Archaeology in the Middle East,” 5.

political endeavors in exchange for permission to excavate and export antiquities and for French help with the logistics and security of archaeological sites.

### ***Archaeology as Physical Control***

Although the field of archaeology feels like it belongs more to the world of museums and universities than to the realm of politics and warfare, archaeological digs nevertheless served a key strategic purpose for the French government. Lacking the classic “consent of the governed,” the French administration in Syria faced fierce opposition to its presence and therefore relied heavily upon the military and use of brute force.<sup>25</sup> Due to both the limited power of the war-weary army and the nature of Syria’s geography, the French opted for a strategy termed *la guerre colonial*, which was based on controlling movement *through* space rather than the space itself.<sup>26</sup>

One of the greatest obstacles to French control over both territory and movement was the desert. This obstacle manifested itself both topographically and culturally. At the most basic level, the unwelcoming vastness and emptiness of the desert did not lend themselves to total dominance. In addition, the desert’s Bedouin inhabitants followed a lifestyle far removed from norms the French tried to impose, leading nomadic tribes to play a decisive role in insurgent movements like the 1925 Great Syrian Revolt.<sup>27</sup> In describing the French frustration with desert landscapes, Neep argues, “Desert distances are too vast, the territory too inhospitable and the logistics too unworkable for the colonial state to unfurl its institutional arms and embrace Bedouin society, much less to reach inside and reorder it.”<sup>28</sup> The impenetrability of the Syrian

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<sup>25</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 261.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 103, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511686856.

<sup>27</sup> Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: the Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 169, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00266>.

<sup>28</sup> Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate*, 165.

desert comes through in one of Rostovtzeff's letters to Yale University President James Angell, in which he explained that the dig's French-born field director, Maurice Pillet, faced "various difficulties which he had had to surmount in shipping his material from Aleppo to the distant ruins of Dura."<sup>29</sup> With such hurdles to exerting control, the French desperately needed footholds in the desert.

Sites like Dura-Europos, in spite of their image as ancient cities far removed from contemporary conflicts, were embedded in the strategic landscape of Syria. In fact, Europeans first identified Dura-Europos' treasures during a battle in 1920, when British troops used the stone walls surrounding the city as a line of defense against Ottoman troops until the Ottomans forced them to retreat and abandon the city.<sup>30</sup> The site again became a site of violence in 1925, when the Great Syrian Revolt put a halt to excavations.<sup>31</sup>

Given this ongoing conflict, dig sites doubled as government and military outposts, serving as oases of French control in an otherwise unyielding landscape. At sites like Dura-Europos, Palmyra, Mari, and Ugarit, French officials led or supervised the excavations, citing the "hazardous" nature of such enterprises and the "political instability of the region."<sup>32</sup> When it came to France's political rivals on the international stage, the government was sometimes loath to yield control over excavations to foreigners. Although the German Max von Oppenheim had excavated parts of Tell Halaf in northeastern Syria before the First World War, the mandate government did not grant his team permission to resume their dig until 1927, after Germany joined the League of Nations.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Letter from Michael Rostovtzeff to James Angell, April 27, 1928, Box 1, Folder 6, George Lincoln Hendrickson Papers (MS 1272), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

<sup>30</sup> "The Old and the New on the Euphrates," Box 3, Folder 27, Hopkins Family Papers (MS 290), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

<sup>31</sup> Baird, *Dura-Europos*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Gillot, "Towards a Socio-Political History of Archaeology in the Middle East," 6.

<sup>33</sup> France's hesitance to allow Oppenheim (1860–1946) to return to Syria may not have been unfounded. To British authorities in the years leading up to the First World War, he was known as "the Kaiser's spy" and "the chief

Even when foreign teams received permits to excavate, French forces still played a key role. In 1928, for example, the French military assigned forty Syrian soldiers from the Syrian Legion to Dura-Europos, as well as eighteen *gendarmes* or *gardes mobiles*.<sup>34</sup> Another visible vestige of the French military was Le Comte Robert du Mesnil du Buisson, a former captain in the French army representing the French academy during the 1932 season of the dig at Dura, who frequently paraded around the ruins in his military uniform.<sup>35</sup> For local populations working at or living near excavations, the presence of the French government — and above all the French military — was inescapable.

Not only did the troops assigned to such digs assist with the security of the camps, but they sometimes played a vital role in the excavation work itself. Rostovtzeff reported to Yale President Angell in 1928 that civil and military authorities in Abou Kamal and Sahliyah helped Pillet get “a sufficient supply of native labor,” and the *gendarmes* assigned to the camp assisted “Pillet in supervising the native workmen.”<sup>36</sup> Under the supervision of the unit’s commander, the military detachment freed the Gate of Palmyra “from a deep layer of sandstones and rubbish.”<sup>37</sup> In his report to the director of Syria’s Antiquities Service, Pillet noted that forty soldiers were involved in the excavation of the Gate of Palmyra, while only ten *gardes mobiles* “assured the site’s security.”<sup>38</sup> The French military was even of use to excavation work in the air.<sup>39</sup> World War I aviator Antoine Poidebard undertook numerous flights over the desert to contribute to the

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instigator and organizer of a projected Muslim jihad against the Entente powers (Britain, France, and Russia).” Lionel Gossman, *The Passion of Max von Oppenheim: Archaeology and Intrigue in the Middle East from Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2013), xxv, 126.

<sup>34</sup> The *gendarmerie* was (and still is) a branch of the French military responsible for internal security.

<sup>35</sup> Baird, *Dura-Europos*, 12; Simon James, “Stratagems, Combat, and ‘Chemical Warfare’ in the Siege Mines of Dura-Europos,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 115, no. 1 (2011): 70, doi:10.3764/aja.115.1.0069.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Michael Rostovtzeff to James Angell, April 27, 1928, Box 1, Folder 6, Hendrickson Papers.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Report from Maurice Pillet to Henri Seyrig, July 12, 1928, Box 1, Folder 6, Hendrickson Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen L. Dyson, *In Pursuit of Ancient Pasts: A History of Classical Archaeology in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 174-175; Michael Sommer, *Palmyra: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 4.



understanding of the eastern Roman frontier system, and Henri Seyrig, director of the Antiquities Service for Lebanon and Syria, promised the Yale team the use of several Syrian air officers to make aerial maps of the area.<sup>40</sup>

At Palmyra, the French military went a step further in making their mark on the site. The 1st *Méhariste* Company first established a base by the Temple of Bel in Palmyra in 1921 and played an important role in pacifying the surrounding desert.<sup>41</sup> Seyrig began excavations at the site in 1929, and in doing so uprooted the local population. To give the archaeologists free rein, French engineers from the *Service du Génie* began building a new settlement nearby to relocate the Palmyrene Syrians, who numbered in the thousands.<sup>42</sup> This new garrison town followed French architectural principles, including wide, perpendicular avenues, a municipal building, and streetlights. The *Revue des Troupes du Levant* even featured the settlement in 1936, reporting that “native residents boast of Palmyra’s ‘avenues,’ filled with light and air, and of its monuments and greenery!”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Letter from Michael Rostovtzeff to James Angell, February 17, 1931, Box 94, Folder 955, James Rowland Angell, President of Yale University, Records (RU 24), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

<sup>41</sup> In fact, Palmyra was considered so strategically important that its control became a point of contention between the French and British governments during the negotiation of the Sykes-Picot agreement. Arthur James Balfour, *Memorandum by Mr. Balfour (Paris) Respecting Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia [132187/2117/44A]*, vol. 4, London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1919.

<sup>42</sup> Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate*, 143.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 142.



Figure 2: Old village of Tadmor built on and among the ruins of Palmyra. All the contemporary dwellings were demolished to make way for the French excavation under Henri Seyrig. *Palmyra (Tadmor). Street of village in Temple of the Sun*, ca. 1920. Wikimedia Commons, accessed April 10, 2021, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:01\\_tadmor\\_old\\_village.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:01_tadmor_old_village.jpg).

The principle behind such building projects was that “adopting the spatial formations of Western cities” could “gradually instil in the Levantine populations the disciplined habits of the French modern.”<sup>44</sup> As one French priest on the ground alleged, recruits living in the new houses in Palmyra were more likely to spend time and money on their homes, rather than on playing card games and loitering in the streets.<sup>45</sup> With archaeological projects like that at Palmyra, the French government found an opportunity to displace Syrians to settlements that the French believed would push them toward European notions of modernity and civilization.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>45</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the inhabitants of Palmyra were unhappy with the new constructions, and they “lobbied the High Commissioner to provide funds to construct the homes in keeping with their own traditions.” Ibid, 143.



Figure 3: Aerial map of ruins of Palmyra next to the modern French-designed city. Compared to contemporary Syrian towns, the layout of the new town of Tadmor much more closely resembled that of a French city. *A map showing the ruins of ancient Palmyra*, May 20, 2015. ABC News, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-21/a-map-showing-the-ruins-of-ancient-palmyra/6486722?nw=0>.

The French government faced a dilemma during the mandate years: Should it use any means necessary to pacify the Syrian desert and thereby risk its reputation at home and abroad, or should it cede control over some of the mandate's territory and fail in its self-proclaimed *mission civilisatrice*? Archaeological sites helped provide a way out of this dichotomy. By posting units nearby digs, the French military managed to exert more control over the local population and impose French ways of living, while at the same time showing the world that they were protecting archaeologists and promoting the pursuit of knowledge.

## *Archaeology as Profit*

Due in large part to this military presence, the Syrian project turned out to generate both more costs and fewer revenues than anticipated. First and foremost, keeping the mandate afloat required immense military expenditures. In 1921, there were 70,000 regular soldiers in the Armée du Levant, as well as several Foreign Legion battalions, artillery batteries, and the engineer and aviation corps.<sup>46</sup> By 1936, France had spent around four billion francs on Syria alone.<sup>47</sup> The metropole received only meager economic returns on this enormous investment, including incomes for “the Lyon silk firms, Marseille traders, army and navy officials, civil servants, shareholders in the railways, and religious organizations.”<sup>48</sup>

Ancient ruins, however, proved a fruitful source of goods to send to France as a tangible benefit of the occupation. The French public had long fostered a keen interest in antiquities from the Middle East; museums only continued to grow in national importance into the twentieth century, as competition to acquire ancient artifacts from Egypt and Mesopotamia swelled between countries like France, England, Germany, and the United States.<sup>49</sup> By leading excavations abroad and importing antiquities to showcase to the public at home, Western nations asserted their authority on the world stage. For visitors to the British Museum and the Louvre, seeing objects from faraway lands was therefore not just an amusing outing but a cause of national pride.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Many of these soldiers hailed from other parts of the French empire, including Madagascar, North Africa, and Senegal. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 260.

<sup>47</sup> By comparison, the French government’s state expenditures in 1936 totaled less than 56 billion francs. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 252; World History at KMLA, “France 1929-1939: The Economy,” accessed April 10, 2021, <https://www.zum.de/whkmla/region/france/france19291939ec.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 252.

<sup>49</sup> The popularity of museums began in the nineteenth century, when a 1847 display of ancient Assyrian artifacts at the Louvre resulted in such a surge in enthusiasm that the museum suspended its usual rule that the general public was only allowed inside on Sundays, permitting visitors throughout the entire week. Frederick Nathaniel Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 75-76.

<sup>50</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 253-254.

To keep up with the European demand for ancient art, permission-granting agencies like Seyrig's Service des Antiquités contributed to a wave of antiquities leaving Syria, both for France itself and other Western powers.<sup>51</sup> Although earlier powers like the Ottomans had often given foreign powers permission to export excavated goods, the French government kept a much firmer hold over the antiquities trade.<sup>52</sup> The High Commissioner issued an edict titled Arrêté no. 207 in 1926 regulating the trade, which banned the destruction of “mobile antiquities” and the exportation of antiquities deemed belonging to the state. Those who *destroyed* ancient artifacts faced a fine of 25 to 500 Syrian pounds, while those charged with illegal *export* faced much more serious consequences: a fine of 50 to 100,000 Syrian pounds, as well as imprisonment of eight days to six months.<sup>53</sup> Given this disparity between punishments for destroying versus illegally exporting antiquities, the French government did not just desire to protect artifacts, but above all wanted to keep a preponderance of the pickings for themselves.

These French laws developed the *partage* system, under which the mandate government and foreign-led excavation teams divided the findings of digs within Syrian borders.<sup>54</sup> Under this system, foreign archaeologists typically had to divide discovered artifacts into two approximately equal piles, and a representative of the antiquities services would visit the site to decide which

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<sup>51</sup> Gavin Lucas, *Critical Approaches to Fieldwork: Contemporary and Historical Archaeological Practice* (London: Routledge, 2001), 48.

<sup>52</sup> In response to European desires for antiquities, the Ottoman Empire criminalized the common practice of (re)using stones from ruins. As Abu El-Haj argues, “In theory, [the 1884 law] effectively outlawed everyday practices of the land’s inhabitants, even if this area of the law was rarely enforced.” Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 42; Morag Kersel, “The Changing Legal Landscape for Middle Eastern Archaeology in the Colonial Era, 1800–1930,” in *Pioneers to the Past: American Archaeologists in the Middle East, 1919–1920*, ed. G. Emberling (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), 85, <https://oi.uchicago.edu/sites/oi.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/shared/docs/oimp30.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> “Arrêté No 207 Portant Règlement Sur Les Antiquités En Syrie Et Au Liban,” *Syria* 7, no. 2 (1926): 187-92, accessed February 28, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4236904>. *Syria* was a journal published by the Institut français du Proche-Orient starting in 1920.

<sup>54</sup> The *partage* system was vital to the expansion of many Western museums, including the British Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, and the university museums of institutions like Yale, Harvard, the University of Chicago, and the University of Pennsylvania. James B. Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity?: Museums and the Battle Over Our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), xxv.



collection would remain in Syria and which could be exported.<sup>55</sup> In theory, the system was devised to ensure that half of all artifacts ended up in Syria's newly founded museums, but both French government officials and foreign archaeologists exploited the system to acquire a greater share of the objects and to ensure that they could display the most impressive finds in Western museums.

The controversies surrounding the *partage* system come through in correspondence between Dura-Europos' French field director, Maurice Pillet, and the Yale administration. During the French-led excavations of Dura-Europos before the Great Syrian Revolt, the government had shipped many of the discovered artifacts to the Louvre, where a significant collection from the site remains to this day.<sup>56</sup> Even when an American team came to lead the excavation, the French government was determined to preserve the flow of antiquities to Paris. In a draft of the contract between the French government and the Yale administration concerning the excavations at Dura-Europos, the High Commissioner stated that "at the end of each campaign, the mobile objects will be transported to Damascus and divided by the Special Commission" established under Arrêté no. 207. The draft contract further noted that "unique objects will enter the national collection of the Syrian state," but that "the objects that demand special study (parchment, tablets, etc.) will be transported to Paris and will not return to Syria until publication is achieved."<sup>57</sup>

These clauses angered Yale administrators, who felt cheated out of their share of the spoils. In addition to seeking the prestige of conducting a major excavation in the Middle East, Yale desperately wanted papyri and paintings for its collection, especially since the Yale

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<sup>55</sup> Agatha Christie, *Come, Tell Me How You Live* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1946), 159.

<sup>56</sup> Baird, *Dura-Europos*, 6; Louvre, "Collections," accessed April 10, 2021, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/>.

<sup>57</sup> Draft accord between Yale University and the French High Commissioner, 1927, Box 1, Folder 5, Hendrickson Papers.

University Art Gallery had just put the finishing touches on a new building.<sup>58</sup> Yale classics professor Charles Torrey responded to Pillet asking, “Are we to understand that the ‘objects which require special study ... are to be forwarded from Paris to New Haven? Unless this is the case, I, for one, should not approve the acceptance of the conditions.’”<sup>59</sup> Pillet replied that goods could be forwarded to New Haven as well, although Yale would have to acquire a permit for *temporary* export out of Syria.<sup>60</sup> The amended contract appeased the Yale administration, and by 1930, Hendrickson happily reported to President Angell that “a large number of valuable and interesting objects discovered in the course of the excavations form a special exhibit in the Yale Art Museum.”<sup>61</sup> Although the contract was meant to ensure that unique objects returned to Syria after they were studied and findings published, both the French government and foreign institutions ignored this clause, and most of the items exported remained abroad.<sup>62</sup>

In spite of this brief respite, the conflict over the export of antiquities reemerged a few years later. In 1932, Rostovtzeff penned a frustrated letter to President Angell about the dig’s progress, reminding him that “ever since the beginning of our dig we wanted to have at least one part of the frescoes discovered by [James Henry] Breasted and Cumont.”<sup>63</sup> He explained that Pillet negotiated an agreement with the Service des Antiquités in Syria for a fresco specialist to come remove the artwork for transport to New Haven, which seemed at first “to be profitable to us.” Then, however, he complained that “there is a bad clause which I would not have signed” if

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<sup>58</sup> Baird, *Dura-Europos*, 8; Yale University Art Gallery, “Architecture,” accessed April 9, 2021, <https://artgallery.yale.edu/about/architecture>.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Charles Torrey to George Lincoln Hendrickson, July 23, 1927, Box 1, Folder 5, Hendrickson Papers.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Maurice Pillet to Charles Torrey, 1927, Box 1, Folder 5, Hendrickson Papers.

<sup>61</sup> Many of these objects to this day remain at the Yale University Art Gallery, which holds a collection of over 12,000 artifacts from Dura-Europos. Letter from Charles Torrey to George Lincoln Hendrickson, August 30, 1927, Box 1, Folder 5, Hendrickson Papers; Classics Department Report, 1930, Box 1, Folder 6, Hendrickson Papers; Yale University Art Gallery, “Dura Europos: Excavating Antiquity.”

<sup>62</sup> Baird, *Dura-Europos*, 9.

<sup>63</sup> James Henry Breasted (1865–1935) was an American archaeologist at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago who visited Dura-Europos after the British army found it to conduct a preliminary investigation. Baird, *Dura-Europos*, 3; Letter from Michael Rostovtzeff to James Angell, March 16, 1931, Box 2, Folder 8, Hendrickson Papers.

he had been in charge, revealing that the agreement stated that if any frescoes meant to go to the French were to accidentally sustain damage in the delicate and pain-staking process of being taken from the walls, the Director of Antiquities in Damascus would have the right to claim those meant for Yale instead.

Although no damage occurred and Yale ended up with the fresco that it wanted, the incident proved a breaking point in the relationship between Rostovtzeff and Pillet.<sup>64</sup> Rostovtzeff told Angell that “the only man who is to be blamed for” the difficulties with the excavation was Pillet, leading him to conclude that “this story shows that Pillet must be eliminated from the dig as soon as possible.”<sup>65</sup> He urged the president to appoint Clark Hopkins as field director, which was accomplished just a month later.<sup>66</sup> But disagreements with the French continued under Hopkins. In 1936, tensions between the French government and their American partners escalated even further when the French instituted a new law more carefully regulating the export of antiquities.<sup>67</sup> Angell appealed to the U.S. Department of State, which in turn instructed the American consul in Beirut to complain to the French High Commissioner.<sup>68</sup> More so than any other issue, the debate over the export of antiquities drove a wedge between the Yale archaeologists and their French partners.

Yale was not the only institution to throw its weight — or even the support of its government — behind its archaeologists. Leonard Woolley’s excavation at Tell Atshana received

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<sup>64</sup> Yale University Art Gallery, “Julius Terentius Performing a Sacrifice,” accessed April 9, 2021, <https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/4961>.

<sup>65</sup> Letter from Michael Rostovtzeff to James Angell, March 16, 1931, Box 2, Folder 8, Hendrickson Papers.

<sup>66</sup> Appointment notice of Clark Hopkins as Dura-Europos field director, April 25, 1931, Box 2, Folder 8, Hendrickson Papers.

<sup>67</sup> “Arrêté No 36/LR. Du Haut-Commissaire De France En Syrie Et Au Liban,” *Revue Internationale De La Croix-Rouge Et Bulletin International Des Sociétés De La Croix-Rouge* 23, no. 268 (1941): 292–93, doi:10.1017/S1026881200007376.

<sup>68</sup> Baird, *Dura-Europos*, 15; *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1936, Volume III, Near East and Africa (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 535, accessed April 9, 2021, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1936v03/d535>.



the encouragement and funding of the British Museum, Claude Schaeffer negotiated the division of findings from Ugarit between the Louvre and the Alawite state, and Harald Ingholt's dig at Hamat laid the groundwork for the collection of the Antiquities Department in the National Museum of Denmark.<sup>69</sup> Such negotiations did not always go smoothly; Oppenheim struggled to reach an agreement with the new authorities at Tell Halaf to export the antiquities he had unearthed during his excavation at the site from 1911 to 1913.<sup>70</sup> Again and again, debates over the *partage* system proved a major source of discussion and sometimes contention between the mandate government and foreign institutions, thus highlighting the importance of the right to acquire artifacts as one of the key motivations for the French mandate, Western scholars, and foreign governments.

### ***Archaeology, Allochrony, and Colonial Legitimization***

Beyond either of its physical uses, archaeology also allowed the French government to harness ancient history to center the French civilizing spirit at the heart of its mandatory project. The French government had known from the beginning that the Syrian mandate would not be profitable, although perhaps they had misjudged just *how* unprofitable it would be. At the expense of material gain, the French metropole was meant to receive the intangible benefits of believing that they were bolstering the standing of France on the international stage, bringing European civilization back to the Levant, and protecting the imperiled Christian communities

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<sup>69</sup> National Museum of Denmark, "The Danish Expedition," accessed April 9, 2021, <https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/historical-knowledge-the-world/the-lands-of-the-mediterranean/the-far-east/digital-hama-a-window-on-syrias-past/the-danish-expedition/>; Al-Maqdissi, *Pionniers et protagonistes de l'archéologie syrienne*, 95, 202.

<sup>70</sup> Oppenheim used the artifacts he exported to Germany to create his own Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin. Unfortunately, the museum was the victim of an incendiary bomb during an air raid on Berlin in 1943, causing many of the sculptures to be reduced to smithereens. Gossman, *The Passion of Max von Oppenheim*, 157.

there.<sup>71</sup> To generate these abstract gains, Western archaeologists used their work to propagate two contradictory arguments of colonial legitimization: that Syrians belonged to the past and were therefore primitive and incapable of self-governance, and that Europeans had brought prosperity and technological advancement to the region before and were returning to do so again.

On one hand, archaeology helped justify the paternalism inherent in the *mission civilisatrice*. Writings and photographs from the excavations like that at Dura-Europos conflated the ancient and contemporary inhabitants of the area, a phenomenon called allochrony.<sup>72</sup> By bringing attention to the similarities between past and present lifestyles, allochronic narratives depicted contemporary Syrians as stuck in the past and therefore unable to embrace modernity and change without Western aid.

Several Yale archaeologists at Dura-Europos contributed to such allochronic rhetoric, both implicitly and explicitly. For example, Clark Hopkins — a Yale assistant classics professor and the excavation's second field director — highlighted the similarities between past and present by describing the baking and building methods of the area's Bedouin population, stating that “today the same handmills found in the ruins of the ancient past serve to make the flour.”<sup>73</sup> Comparing the excavated houses at Dura-Europos with contemporary Bedouin practices, Hopkins also noted that “their houses were built, like those in a modern village, with a series of little rooms grouped about a central court” and that some excavated houses featured a painted “evil eye, pierced with nails and a sword, and attacked by cock, vulture, and scorpion, the same symbol as is employed in the modern charm.”<sup>74</sup> Turning from factual observation to criticism, Hopkins argued that the site's Arab workmen “live apart their primitive lives, looking a little

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<sup>71</sup> Christopher M. Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas: The Great War and the Climax of French Imperial Expansion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 239.

<sup>72</sup> Jennifer Baird, “Photographing Dura-Europos, 1928–1937: An Archaeology of the Archive,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 115, no. 3 (2011): 431, doi:10.3764/aja.115.3.0427.

<sup>73</sup> “The Old and the New on the Euphrates,” Box 3, Folder 27, Hopkins Family Papers.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

contemptuously at modern politics, preferring the free, easy life of the desert.”<sup>75</sup> With such allochronic statements, Hopkins played into the French argument that Syrians were incapable of self-governance.



Figure 4: A Bedouin woman using one of the handmills that Hopkins referenced in his essay. Photograph accompanying “The Old and the New on the Euphrates.” Box 3, Folder 27. Hopkins Family Papers (MS 290). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

Such allochronic observations translated to the visual in the expedition’s extensive photographic archives. Baird observes that many of the archaeologists’ images used members of local Syrian communities to model textiles or show the scale of ancient buildings, and so the photographs “place these people in the past and thereby depict them as living a life analogous to those of the past and thus inferior to the contemporary world of the excavators.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Baird, “Photographing Dura-Europos,” 430.

At the same time as Western archaeologists framed contemporary Syrians as *belonging* to the past, they argued that this past *belonged* to Westerners instead. While Dura-Europos' photographs portrayed Syrians as living in the past, they simultaneously “disinherit[ed] them from that past by depicting them as passive props or mere scales.”<sup>77</sup> In this way, the Syrian subjects of the photographs “stand in but do not inhabit the structures of Dura” shown.<sup>78</sup>



Figure 5: Workers resting by Gate of Palmyra at Dura-Europos. Like many other photographs from the Dura-Europos archive, the Syrian workers sitting next to the ruins face away from the camera and are portrayed as idle and distant. Photograph accompanying “The Old and the New on the Euphrates.” Box 3, Folder 27. Hopkins Family Papers (MS 290). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

Figure 6: Young boy living near the Dura-Europos site. Photographs from the Dura-Europos archive depicting Syrians when they are not adjacent to ancient sites show them in a completely different way. This boy is shown from up close and head on, showing a level of emotion and personality that does not come across in photographs from the worksite itself. Photograph accompanying “The Old and the New on the Euphrates.” Box 3, Folder 27. Hopkins Family Papers (MS 290). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> “The Old and the New on the Euphrates,” Box 3, Folder 27, Hopkins Family Papers.

This lack of true interaction with the structures contrasts with one of the rare photos in the collection of the Western archaeological team, in which Rostovtzeff and Cumont pose in the Mithraeum — a temple of Mithras — with both their hands touching the altar. While the Syrian subjects were adjacent to but not part of the buildings, the Western archaeologists could touch and interact with the ruins.<sup>79</sup> Through both writing and photography, Western archaeologists at Dura-Europos used allochrony to objectify and patronize the local population and thereby defend the existence of a mandatory government that was struggling to deny this same population self-governance.



Figure 7: Michael Rostovtzeff (right) and Franz Cumont (left) posing by the Mithraeum. The photographer's depiction of their interaction with the ruins differs immensely from the depiction of the Syrian workers who did the excavation work. Raining Stones, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://manelmiro.com/2012/08/14/la-decadencia-de-la-ciudad-antigua-3-michael-i-rostovtzeff/>.

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<sup>79</sup> James Breasted had gone so far as to literally paint out the head and turban of one of the troops aiding his excavation from the background of a photograph. Baird, “Photographing Dura-Europos,” 433; Baird, *Dura-Europos*, 6.

At the same time as they attempted to create distance between Syria's ancient history and its contemporary population, the Western archaeologists and imperial authorities presented themselves as true heirs to the original inhabitants of the region. This trope began with James Breasted, who first explored the ruins at Dura-Europos after their discovery by British forces and coined the term "Fertile Crescent" to describe the Levant's status as the cradle of civilization.<sup>80</sup> In his telling of history, Western civilization first emerged in Mesopotamia, which then passed on the torch to Greece, Rome, and eventually to Western European nations like Britain and France.<sup>81</sup> This narrative developed during excavations at Dura-Europos under Franz Cumont, who wrote in 1926 that Hellenistic and Roman cities like Dura-Europos and Palmyra were "European islands lost in an Asiatic ocean" that "had to struggle to protect themselves against the danger of being submerged by the flood of aliens who surrounded them."<sup>82</sup>

The notion that ancient sites like Dura-Europos were the heritage of the West and not of Syria's Arab population also underlaid Rostovtzeff's rhetoric in the 1930s. As an expert on Roman history, Rostovtzeff viewed the history of Dura-Europos through the lens of Rome's presence in the Levant, rather than through a lens that treated all the civilizations that inhabited the region equally. In several speeches at universities across the United States, for example, Rostovtzeff laid out a history of Dura-Europos that framed its change over time as an epic battle between East and West, or as he put it, "the eternal problem: Orient or Rome."<sup>83</sup> In another

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<sup>80</sup> Jeffrey Abt, "Toward a Historian's Laboratory: The Breasted-Rockefeller Museum Projects in Egypt, Palestine, and America," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 33 (1996): 174, accessed April 11, 2021, doi:10.2307/40000614.

<sup>81</sup> Associated Press, "Art of Third Century in Syrian Ruins," *The New York Times*, June 10, 1922, <https://nyti.ms/328rrOt>.

<sup>82</sup> Pierre Briant, "Michael Rostovtzeff, Elias J. Bickerman and the 'Hellenization of Asia,'" in J. G. Manning (ed.) *Writing History in Times of War: Michael Rostovtzeff, Elias Bickerman and the "Hellenization of Asia"* (Stuttgart, Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015), 28.

<sup>83</sup> Notes for speech at Barnard, Box 28, Folder 173, Rostovtzeff Papers.



speech, he described Dura as “a bridge between East and West, connecting the age old [sic] civilizations of the East with the Greek world.”<sup>84</sup>

In the battle between “Orient” and “Rome,” Rostovtzeff took a clear side. In a speech on the “importance of Dura,” he described the site as “Syrian Pompeii,” thereby framing the city as an inferior example of Roman civilization on its frontiers, rather than viewing it as having a culture in its own right.<sup>85</sup> Although both the Romans and Parthians took over the city at various points, he characterized the site as fundamentally Roman. To do so, he otherized the city’s Parthian inhabitants, referring to Dura’s Parthian era as an “occupation” and a “struggle.”<sup>86</sup> The graduate student Jotham Johnson made this dichotomy between “European” and “native” even more explicit in his description of the site’s name, detailing how the city’s Hellenistic founder Seleucus “called it Europos, and the inhabitants were Europeans; the natives—it seems they had them, even in those days—called it simply Doura, the Castle.”<sup>87</sup>

In describing the European rediscovery of Dura-Europos during the First World War, Yale archaeologists personified the ruins as choosing Westerners as their saviors. Rostovtzeff narrated how the city “was conquered, destroyed and then abandoned by the Sassanian Persians. Since that time it has been a ruin, a part of the desert, which engulfed and preserved it, awaiting its excavator,” while Johnson recounted how the Sassanids “abandoned it to goats and hyenas,” allowing the desert to hide the shrines and paintings of the site “from the nomads of the plains” until “the sand, self-willed, chose that moment [of the British army’s arrival] to drift away, and the old pictures shyly courtseyed [sic] again for modern eyes.”<sup>88</sup> In this way, Rostovtzeff and

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<sup>84</sup> Notes for speech at art school, Box 28, Folder 173, Rostovtzeff Papers.

<sup>85</sup> Notes for speech on importance of Dura, Box 28, Folder 173, Rostovtzeff Papers; Baird, *Dura-Europos*, 8.

<sup>86</sup> Notes for speech on importance of Dura, Box 28, Folder 173, Rostovtzeff Papers.

<sup>87</sup> Johnson, ““A Trade for Halliburton,”” 741.

<sup>88</sup> It was not a European soldier who found the wall paintings, but sepoy troops from India serving in the British army, who were in the process of making a rifle pit. Notes for speech at Barnard, Box 28, Folder 173, Rostovtzeff Papers; Johnson, ““A Trade for Halliburton,”” 741; Baird, *Dura-Europos*, 3.

Johnson characterized the ruins as helpless and frozen in time, waiting for Europeans to return and rescue them from the desert and its inhabitants. With this narrative, Rostovtzeff also tacitly cast contemporary Syrian Arabs as the descendants of the Sassanian Persians, supposedly ignorant of the importance of the site and not the region's original inhabitants. At the same time, he put forward Western political authorities and archaeologists as the descendants of Rome and therefore the true heirs to the city — and, by extension, the region. Altogether, the speech depicted Dura-Europos as a remnant of great civilization that would only resurface with the “return” of Europeans to political power in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Through these arguments about Dura-Europos and its inhabitants, Rostovtzeff posed the city as a case study of “one of the most important phenomena in the history of world civilization: the hellenization of Oriental civilization, life and art first and then the re-orientalization of this now mixed civilization and art.”<sup>89</sup> In his telling, Syria was a battleground between Oriental and Hellenistic, cycling between the two. Through this framing of antiquity, archaeology showed that Western imperial powers had as much legitimacy as Arab nationalists calling for self-governance.

In this narrative of “Orient” and “Rome,” Dura-Europos’ archaeologists painted Syrian history as an ongoing struggle between the rational, civilized nature of the West and the emotional, cruel ways of the East, which served as a tacit justification of French political power over contemporary Syrians. Rostovtzeff delineated the official religion of the Roman garrison at Dura as “conventional, traditional, political and official. No place for Oriental cults, no emotional ceremonies.”<sup>90</sup> Here he seemed again to draw a parallel between the Romans at Dura and the French imperial government, while at the same time contrasting these two facets with

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<sup>89</sup> Notes for speech at art school, Box 28, Folder 173, Rostovtzeff Papers.

<sup>90</sup> Notes for speech “Dura-Europos on the Euphrates,” Box 30, Folder 186, Rostovtzeff Papers.



their counterparts: the Parthians and their Arab “descendants.” His focus on emotion — or lack thereof — plays into orientalist narratives that paint the Eastern or Arab “Other” as overly passionate and effeminate, and by extension incapable of good government.<sup>91</sup>

Beyond subtle comparisons between the ancient Romans and the modern French and British, Yale’s archaeologists also explicitly praised the mandatory powers. Hopkins lauded the French and British for imposing a “regime of law and order” that put an end to guerrilla warfare between Bedouin tribes, and then went on to tell the story of how British troops discovered the ruins of Dura-Europos during a battle before being forced to retreat.<sup>92</sup> Although he first wrote that the site’s “paintings were left *covered* by hastily constructed walls,” he then crossed out the typed word “covered” and replaced it with “protected” — a stronger endorsement of the British action.<sup>93</sup> He commended the French as well for beginning “systematic and very successful excavations” once “peace was restored.”<sup>94</sup> Rostovtzeff echoed such admiration for the French authorities, applauding in a speech the “enlightened and kind attitude of the French civil and military authorities in Syria and of M. Seyrig in particular.”<sup>95</sup>

Archaeological sites also aided the French in establishing a religious connection to the region. The French had an easier time employing religious rhetoric in Lebanon with its sizable Christian population, which France had first begun “protecting” in the seventeenth century.<sup>96</sup> Although Syria had deep Christian roots, it proved more difficult to find contemporary Christian

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<sup>91</sup> For more detail on Western conceptions of the East as overly emotional and feminine, see Chapter 2 of Said’s *Orientalism*.

<sup>92</sup> “The Old and the New on the Euphrates,” Box 3, Folder 27, Hopkins Family Papers.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Notes for speech at Yale art school, Box 28, Folder 173, Rostovtzeff Papers.

<sup>96</sup> The French government had been party to the international agreement on the future of the Maronite Christians of Mount Lebanon in 1861, and the region had long received a steady flow of French missionaries and teachers. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 247; Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate*, 26.

connections in majority-Muslim Syria.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, archaeologists tended to divert much of their limited time and resources to Christian and Jewish art and architecture when they were found.

Among both archaeologists and the general public, Dura-Europos became best known for the discovery of a synagogue and an early Christian church in the ancient city — the discovery of which Hopkins called “most astounding of all.”<sup>98</sup> Both Rostovtzeff and Hopkins drew special attention to the site’s connection to the history of Christianity. Hopkins celebrated the discovery of a Christian chapel at Dura-Europos and described how “even now [he] cannot enter the room without a thrill of surprise. The desert is so grey and colorless ... As one steps into the room, therefore, the brilliant hues, the immense variety of scene and color is startling by its very contrast.”<sup>99</sup> By comparing the “colorless” desert with the “brilliant” church interior, he seemed to draw a larger conclusion about the benefits that the spread of Christianity could have for the region.

Rostovtzeff, meanwhile, described the sites as “two places of worship which connect the religious life of Dura with our own time,” explicitly tying the ancient Roman past to the contemporary politics of the region.<sup>100</sup> He further noted that the church paintings conveyed “the most cherished ideas and mysteries of the new religion, which was destined to become the religion of a large part of the civilized world today.”<sup>101</sup> Whereas earlier he represented the battle between West and East in the region as cyclical, here he characterized the eventual domination of

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<sup>97</sup> The French government conducted a census of Syria and Lebanon in both 1921 and 1932, but it is difficult to estimate the true religious breakdown at the time. The French underreported Muslim communities and overreported Christians in order to maximize Christian representation in regional legislatures. Stacy D. Fahrenthold, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente: the First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 139.

<sup>98</sup> Clipping of “Dura-Europos Discoveries: The Unexpected in Archaeology” from the *Illustrated London News*, August 13, 1932, Box 93, Folder 945, Angell Papers.

<sup>99</sup> “The Old and the New on the Euphrates,” Box 3, Folder 27, Hopkins Family Papers.

<sup>100</sup> Notes for speech at Barnard, Box 28, Folder 173, Rostovtzeff Papers.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

Christianity as inevitable, resulting “in the victorious progress of the Christian faith” that European imperial projects in the Muslim world could help promote.<sup>102</sup>

Yale went even further in tying together the ancient and contemporary Christians of the region when they invited a Chaldean priest visiting from Iraq to conduct a service at the Christian baptistry from Dura-Europos. The baptistry had been brought over from Syria as part of the *partage* system and rebuilt at the Gallery of Fine Arts, now the Yale University Art Gallery. A Yale press release noted that the priest was a “representative of the oldest oriental Christian congregation” and “was deeply impressed by this oldest monument to the faith of his forefathers,” holding the service “in the ancient Syrian tongue of his people.”<sup>103</sup> With such language, it noted the ongoing relevance of Syria’s ancient Christian history to some of its religious sects, thereby positing the Yale archaeologists and the French government as saviors coming to the aid of an oppressed minority.

These two central arguments of French archaeology stand in sharp contrast to each other. On the one hand, this rhetoric argued that the Syrian past was once glorious and therefore needed a helping hand from the French to achieve that glory again. This contrast between past and present emerged during Rostovtzeff’s speech at Barnard, in which he noted that he found “the spectacular ruins” of Mari “astonishing and surprizing [sic]” because he had to ask himself, “How could such a palace of many hundreds of rooms with a majestic ziggurat (Babylonian tower) have been built by a king who ruled over a stretch of land where a few settled Arabs nowadays lead a miserable life?”<sup>104</sup> By expressing such incredulity, he emphasized the difference between the past achievements of the region — when it served as the “cradle of civilization” and

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Yale University News Statement, September 18, 1939, Box 1, Folder 19, Yale University Art Gallery Photographs of Collections (RU 752), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

<sup>104</sup> Notes for speech at Barnard, Box 28, Folder 173, Rostovtzeff Papers.

the birthplace of Christianity and Judaism — on the one hand, and its present lack of vitality on the other.

But the second fundamental argument of French archaeology was quite the opposite. The allochronic rhetoric that emerges from the archives of Dura-Europos argued not that ancient civilization was advanced and necessary to recreate. Instead, the similarities that scholars like Hopkins emphasized between past and contemporary Syrians were meant to prove that Syrians were still too primitive and backward to rule themselves. Thus, Western archaeologists were simultaneously arguing that Syrian antiquity was modern and savage, awesome and modest, in need of recreation and in need of immediate abandonment.

### **“Syrians, Remember Your Forefathers”: Syrian Political Uses of Archaeology**

As much as French authorities and Western archaeologists attempted to posit archaeological sites and ancient history as their sole domain, events like foreign-led excavations and the Great Syrian Revolt increasingly brought Syrians into contact with archaeology and brought ancient history into the nationalist debate over Syria’s post-independence future. Archaeologists initially alienated local populations with exploitative working conditions and patronizing rhetoric, leading surrounding communities to destroy antiquities at several points. Over time, however, local governments began to claim antiquities as Syrian patrimony, and nationalists began to use ancient history to create and legitimize the Syrian nation.

### ***Local Encounters with Antiquity***

Not much research has been done into the attitudes and interactions of local populations with ancient ruins before the mandate period, but the Syrians who had the greatest contact with

archaeological sites under the French were the Syrians who lived near and worked on the digs. For many of these laborers, these digs had negative consequences that served to alienate them from archaeology and the ancient Syrian past.

Although Syrians did most of the physical work of archaeology, their Western overseers made a clear distinction between “worker” and “archaeologist.”<sup>105</sup> This distinction was based in Napoleonic orientalism, which, in the words of Idir Ouahes, is predicated on “the assumption that local peoples had neither an interest in their ancient past, nor the capacity to preserve it.”<sup>106</sup> To illustrate this stereotype, Johnson recounted a story from Dura-Europos of a worker who was “painstakingly breaking up big sherds into splinters.”<sup>107</sup> When Johnson asked him why he was doing so, the worker responded, “The Inspector said he wanted very small sherds,” referring to the overseer’s instructions to collect even tiny pieces of ceramics from the rubble.<sup>108</sup> Although Johnson presented the story as supposed evidence of the ignorance of the local population, it instead serves to demonstrate how little education Western archaeologists provided to their workforce and how jealously they guarded historical knowledge production.

Unlike neighboring Iraq, where institutions like the National Museum of Iraq and the Institute of Fine Arts and exchanges with the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago cultivated a generation of Arab archaeologists, the French in Syria made no such effort to include Syrians in the intellectual and academic work of pre-Islamic archaeology.<sup>109</sup> Even though the Institut Français founded in Damascus in 1922 recruited “students to study the beautiful specimens of their predecessor’s artistic production,” the institute focused solely on

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<sup>105</sup> Baird, “Photographing Dura-Europos,” 436.

<sup>106</sup> Idir Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon Under the French Mandate: Cultural Imperialism and the Workings of Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 38.

<sup>107</sup> Sherds are broken pieces of ceramic material, often from archaeological sites.

<sup>108</sup> Johnson, “A Trade for Halliburton,” 741.

<sup>109</sup> Kamyar Abdi, “From Pan-Arabism to Saddam Hussein’s Cult of Personality: Ancient Mesopotamia and Iraqi National Ideology,” *Journal of Social Archaeology* 8, no. 1 (February 2008): 15-16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605307086076>.

post-Hellenistic art and did not give Syrian students the opportunity to explore earlier periods in the mandate's history.<sup>110</sup>

On the rare occasions when Arab archaeologists held higher leadership positions, such as the position of overseer, they sometimes did not come from Syria itself, like the Egyptian foremen who oversaw excavations at Ingholt's excavation at Hama and the Lebanese cousins, Tannus and Elias Maluf, who aided Oppenheim in his dig at Tell Halaf.<sup>111</sup> This pattern differed from Iraqi policy, where foreign archaeological teams had to hire an Arab as a member of the professional staff, who was paid on the pay scale of the other members and received a year of education in England or America for every year of the dig.<sup>112</sup> Max Mallowan claimed these regulations made working in Iraq "impossible" compared to the more lax attitude of the French mandate in Syria.<sup>113</sup>

In some cases, however, Western archaeologists developed close bonds with the Syrian overseers or foremen at their digs. These men often came from influential Syrian families. Ingholt's dig at Hama, for example, was overseen by Ala ad-Din Afandi, a member of the powerful al-Kilani family from Hama, and at Chagar Bazar, Mallowan employed two foremen from Jerablus near Aleppo, named Abd es Salaam and Ahmad ibn Hamoudi.<sup>114</sup> The latter was the son of Hamoudi ibn Ibrahim, Leonard Woolley's foreman at several of his excavations, thereby

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<sup>110</sup> This division that the French emphasized between pre-Islamic and Islamic history also resulted in the compartmentalization of museums, with a museum built in Damascus for artifacts from the Islamic period and a museum in Aleppo for pre-Islamic antiquity. Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon Under the French Mandate*, 64–69.

<sup>111</sup> Gossman, *The Passion of Max von Oppenheim*, 122; National Museum of Denmark, "The Danish Expedition."

<sup>112</sup> Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 215.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> National Museum of Denmark, "The Danish Expedition."

creating a Syrian archaeological dynasty.<sup>115</sup> Agatha Christie described how “Hamoudi and Max [Mallowan] are very gay together. They laugh and sing and cap stories.”<sup>116</sup>



Figure 8: Foreman Sheikh Hamoudi Ibn Ibrahim and Leonard Woolley. Max Mallowan claimed that there was a “life-long friendship” between the two men. Hamoudi came from a respected family of Syrian archaeologists, and his son was a foreman at Mallowan’s dig at Chagar Bazar.

Penn Museum, accessed April 10, 2021,  
<https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/sir-leonard-woolley/>.

Figure 9: Full work team from Harald Ingholt’s dig at Hama, with Ala ad-Din Afandi from the al-Kilani family and Egyptian overseers in the foreground. National Museum of Denmark, accessed April 10, 2021,

<https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/historical-knowledge-the-world/the-lands-of-the-mediterranean/the-far-east/digital-hama-a-window-on-syrias-past/the-danish-expedition/>.

While they developed friendships with certain employees, these archaeologists still held racist and patronizing attitudes toward the majority of the workers they oversaw. For example, Christie quoted her husband as telling the local sheikh at Chagar Bazar, ““How happy I shall be ... if it falls to my lot to enrich you by digging here,” and Oppenheim at Tell Halaf declared, “So

<sup>115</sup> M. E. L. Mallowan, “The Excavations at Tall Chagar Bazar and an Archaeological Survey of the Habur Region. Second Campaign, 1936,” *Iraq* 4, no. 2 (1937): 1.

<sup>116</sup> Christie, of murder mystery novel fame, was married to Max Mallowan, a well-known British archaeologist who excavated Chagar Bazar in northern Syria, and she accompanied him on his expedition from 1935 to 1937. Christie, *Come, Tell Me How You Live*, 45; Al-Maqdissi, *Pionniers et protagonistes de l’archéologie syrienne*, 293.

far as I possibly could, I helped the workmen and their families, and they looked on me as a father ... They were like children and were treated as such.”<sup>117</sup> Such European accounts of worker attitudes, however, must be taken with a hefty grain of salt, as their descriptions of the gratitude and happiness of the workers contradict their simultaneous complaints about the difficulties of finding and retaining laborers.

This divide in the Western imagination between the sophisticated, educated Western “archaeologist” and the naive, childlike Syrian “worker” is most quantifiably visible in the diverging wage rates of Western archaeologists and the manual laborers they hired on the ground.<sup>118</sup> Rostovtzeff reported to President Angell that Pillet had hired workers “for the reasonable pay of about 1 franc a day,” which is equal to around fifty cents in 2015 USD.<sup>119</sup> By contrast, Clark Hopkins earned \$3,500 a year beginning in 1929 and Rostovtzeff earned \$10,000 beginning in 1930, meaning that these two archaeologists earned almost 250 times and over 700 times the daily rate of a Syrian worker, respectively.<sup>120</sup> In the proposed budget for the 1933–1934 season, Hopkins and Rostovtzeff submitted a budget that proposed \$4,000 for the director’s salary alone, compared to just \$1,000 for the total wages of thirty to forty workmen for the entire season.<sup>121</sup>

Not only did archaeological labor pay low wages, but it may even have sometimes constituted forced labor. Pillet complained to Angell in several reports about the difficulties of

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<sup>117</sup> Christie, *Come, Tell Me How You Live*, 66; Gossman, *The Passion of Max von Oppenheim*, 122.

<sup>118</sup> Although beyond the scope of this paper, the attitudes of male archaeologists toward the women who worked at such sites in some ways mirrored their attitudes toward local workers. Female archaeologists like Susan Hopkins, the wife of field director Clark Hopkins, were largely omitted from the written and photographic records of the dig. Graduate student Margaret Crosby received no salary and had to pay her own travel to Syria, unlike her male counterparts. For more detail, see Baird, *Dura-Europos*, 42–43.

<sup>119</sup> Letter from Michael Rostovtzeff to James Angell, April 27, 1928, Box 1, Folder 6, Hendrickson Papers; Rodney Edwinsson, “Historical Currency Converter,” *Historical Statistics*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.historicalstatistics.org/Currencyconverter.html>.

<sup>120</sup> Salary notice for Clark Hopkins, 1929, Box 1, Folder 7, Hendrickson Papers; Salary notice for Michael Rostovtzeff, 1930, Box 1, Folder 7, Hendrickson Papers; Edwinsson, “Historical Currency Converter.”

<sup>121</sup> “Memorandum of Plans for Excavation at Dura,” Box 94, Folder 954, Angell Papers.



finding sufficient local workers but did not go into detail about the solution to the problem beyond that the French military authorities were involved.<sup>122</sup> The answer instead comes from Christie, who heard during a visit to Dura-Europos that when Pillet was unable to entice laborers, “In despair [the expedition] appealed to the French military authorities. The response was prompt and efficient. The French arrested two hundred, or whatever the number needed was, and delivered them at work.”<sup>123</sup> Christie also reported that the French “used to keep their workmen permanently half-pay in arrear,” which “ensured their working continuously.”<sup>124</sup> Johnson even boasted about the corporal punishment of Syrian laborers at Dura-Europos in an article for the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, remarking that “managing the workers is remarkably like taming lions or running slum kids at a fresh air camp. The medium is the same, a four-foot switch.”<sup>125</sup>

Working on excavations could pose a lethal danger as well.<sup>126</sup> In his 1932 progress report for President Angell, Rostovtzeff referred to a tower collapse that resulted in the deaths of three Syrian laborers, concluding from his inspection that to save “money and time Pillet penetrated into the tower not by means of a broad and safe trench with gently sloping sides, but by means of a deep and narrow gallery with almost vertical walls,” a method that “inevitably led to a catastrophe.”<sup>127</sup> Mallowan’s dig at Chagar Bazar similarly suffered a collapse that led to four deaths, leading to the intervention of both the nearby French lieutenant and the local sheikh to mediate between the British team and the aggrieved workers.<sup>128</sup> Western archaeologists thus

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<sup>122</sup> Report from Maurice Pillet to James Angell, November 7, 1928, Box 93, Folder 948, Angell Papers.

<sup>123</sup> Christie, *Come, Tell Me How You Live*, 40.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>125</sup> Johnson’s racist and callous language seems to have rubbed even his fellow Americans the wrong way. Rostovtzeff wrote to Angell, “Johnson is a young bright boy, a little too self-confident and terribly tactless. He never consulted me about his unfortunate article.” Letter from Michael Rostovtzeff to James Angell, July 30, 1929, Box 94, Folder 955, Angell Papers; Johnson, ““A Trade for Halliburton,”” 741.

<sup>126</sup> Baird, “Photographing Dura-Europos,” 438.

<sup>127</sup> Letter from Michael Rostovtzeff to James Angell, March 16, 1931, Box 2, Folder 8, Hendrickson Papers; Baird, “Photographing Dura-Europos,” 438.

<sup>128</sup> Christie described the tragedy as “a tale of base treachery and greed” and claimed that the dead laborers had dug at another team’s site outside of official work hours to claim their findings, thereby absolving the dig’s leadership of any responsibility. Christie, *Come, Tell Me How You Live*, 181.

consistently valued efficiency and cost-effectiveness over Syrian lives and livelihoods, thereby turning Syrians away from archaeology.

With such limited and deeply biased sources, it is difficult to ascertain the exact attitudes of the Syrians who lived and worked on these sites.<sup>129</sup> In the records of the Dura-Europos excavations, workers were listed in field diaries as “men” and “boys,” without even their names noted for posterity.<sup>130</sup> At most, such diaries would make note of their pay or include “comments about their deviousness.”<sup>131</sup> Having been for the most part illiterate, these workers are left without any voice relating how they viewed the sites they worked on. In the words of Gillot, “the presence of the foreign archaeological missions seemed to have made the Syrian elites and local workers progressively aware of the territory’s ancient history, but we cannot ignore the fact that this awareness could have existed well before their interactions with archaeology. What remains difficult to assess is whether archaeological remains were perceived by these groups of people as their heritage.”<sup>132</sup>

### ***Destruction as Resistance***

Although some rural Syrians interacted with archaeology as workers in the early years of the mandate, the debate over Syrian history came to a head during the Great Syrian Revolt in 1925. For the first time, the Syrian elite came together with tribal leaders to challenge the French mandate on a large scale.

To bring together local populations across the country, insurgent leaders often used rhetoric that centered the shared history of the Syrian population. For example, rebel leader

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<sup>129</sup> Gillot argued that “British archaeologists are particularly concerned with their impact on local settings, as their personal accounts show, while French archaeologists do not generally express any views about it.” Gillot, “Towards a Socio-Political History of Archaeology in the Middle East,” 13.

<sup>130</sup> Baird, “Photographing Dura-Europos,” 436.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 438.

<sup>132</sup> Gillot, “Towards a Socio-Political History of Archaeology in the Middle East,” 6.

Sultan al-Atrash issued a manifesto declaring, “Syrians, remember your forefathers, your history ... The imperialists have stolen what is yours.”<sup>133</sup> With this manifesto, Atrash challenged several of the tenets of French-led archaeology, including that both Syrian history and resources such as archaeological artifacts belonged to European powers instead of to Syrians themselves.

At the same time, however, such insurgent rhetoric relied heavily upon another core identity for many rural Syrians: Islam. Throughout the revolt, national leaders used Islamic invocation and symbolism to mobilize the popular classes “in the name of the nation, but also in the name of Allah, the Prophet, and religious solidarity,” with mosques turning into centers of resistance and Muslim clerics serving as intermediaries between political thinkers and the masses.<sup>134</sup> As opposed to the more secular musings of Syrian intellectuals, military leaders during the revolt mixed popular Islamic religion and anti-Christian agitation into their proclamations, and so they “were able to communicate with and organize the resistance of ordinary urban and rural Syrians far better than the self-appointed nationalist elite of intellectuals and Western-educated politicians.”<sup>135</sup>

With this emphasis on shared religion, the Great Syrian Revolt mobilized Syrians based more on the more visceral memory of the crusades and the Islamic wars of conquest than the memory of its ancient civilizations.<sup>136</sup> But beyond religion, what united Syrians across geographic, ethnic, religious, and class lines during the revolt was less about what they had in common and more about what they all opposed.<sup>137</sup> The positing of the French as the “Other”

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<sup>133</sup> Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 3, [muse.jhu.edu/book/3103](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/3103).

<sup>134</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 218.

<sup>135</sup> Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism*, 151.

<sup>136</sup> French officials similarly referred back to the crusades when discussing their Syrian project. According to Ouahes, “In February 1919, the then foreign minister and future president of the Republic, Alexandre Millerand, spoke of a ‘centuries-old [French] Protectorate’ in Syria, originating in the Crusades, one which continued via protection of Christians, charitable works and the provision of relief and education.” Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon Under the French Mandate*, 41.

<sup>137</sup> Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism*, 152.

helped form a national identity in opposition to everything related to the French, including some of the sites that the French had worked so hard to claim as their own.

This popular indifference — and even antagonism — toward Western-led archaeology came to a head in the battle for Damascus in October 1925. During the fight, the Kharrat and Shallash bands occupied the ‘Azm Palace, the eighteenth-century home of Damascene governors that the French had designated as the future home of the Institut d’Art et d’Archéologie Musulman. The insurgents invaded the palace looking for the recently departed High Commissioner, General Sarraïl. When they did not find him, they destroyed or looted many of the archaeological artifacts that the building housed.<sup>138</sup> Instead of claiming these artifacts as their own, the insurgents identified them as trappings of the French occupiers.<sup>139</sup>



Figure 10: Al-'Azm Palace during the Great Syrian Revolt. Although rebel bands took the palace and destroyed many of the artifacts inside, it was the French military who bombed much of the city, resulting in the further loss of historical and architectural treasures. Middle East Institute, accessed April 10, 2021, <http://mideasti.blogspot.com/2013/08/colonial-echoes-1925-1926-france-bombs.html>.

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<sup>138</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 177.

<sup>139</sup> In response to the destruction and the deadly French shelling in response, international actors like the American and British consuls condemned the loss of archaeological treasures. Such criticisms bolstered Western claims to such artifacts by portraying Syrians as destructive rebels unable to recognize the true value of such goods. Ibid, 179.

The destruction of antiquities as a potential act of resistance occurred on several other occasions.<sup>140</sup> After Breasted and the British troops accompanying him left Dura-Europos in 1920, Johnson recounted that “Bedouins rushed in and hacked and smashed the pictures—idolatrous!”<sup>141</sup> Although Johnson attributed the destruction to the prohibition of figurative images in many parts of the Muslim world, it is likely not a coincidence that the paintings were targeted soon after their association with the British military. Archaeologists themselves were also sometimes targeted in Bedouin attacks, including a raid on the foreman’s house at Dura-Europos and the shooting of an old French archaeologist traveling alone at night. Hopkins stated, “Whether robbery or fancied grudge was the motive we never knew,” thus acknowledging that resentment against Western archaeologists might have played a role in the violence.<sup>142</sup>

### ***Reclaiming Ancient History***

Although Western archaeologists focused almost solely on the supposed indifference or antipathy of local populations toward antiquity, a growing nationalist tide during the mandate period worked to reclaim Syrian antiquity as a national treasure. This movement began with the protests of local government officials against the export of antiquities found on Syrian soil. In 1921, Damascus State education minister Muhammad Kurd ‘Ali — backed by the Druze State government — demanded that all Hittite artifacts found in the state of Damascus should remain there.<sup>143</sup> A few years later, Syrian Federation president Subhi Barakat al-Khalidi tried to block an

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<sup>140</sup> This phenomenon had its roots in the decades before the French mandate. French Orientalist Ernest Renan complained in the nineteenth century that Syrians often destroyed monuments instead of handing them over to him. Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon Under the French Mandate*, 50.

<sup>141</sup> Johnson, ““A Trade for Halliburton,”” 741.

<sup>142</sup> Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, 46.

<sup>143</sup> Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon Under the French Mandate*, 57.

excavation by a Czech team.<sup>144</sup> In the first few years of the mandate, these efforts at asserting local control over archaeology floundered. The French allowed the Czech mission to continue by citing an obscure clause of the mandate charter, and Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres blocked the request of the Iraqi-born antiquities dealer J. Elias Gejou to conduct an excavation of Elamite artifacts in 1922.<sup>145</sup>

But in the later years of the mandate, local governments became more adept at countering the efforts of French political and archaeological institutions. In exchange for the significant numbers of artifacts exported to foreign museums, Western archaeologists began to agree to perform services for local museums.<sup>146</sup> Oppenheim provided plaster casts of sculptures he had shipped to Germany to the National Museum in Aleppo, and Ingholt served as curator of the American University in Beriut's Archaeological Museum for the duration of his excavation at Hama.<sup>147</sup>

At Dura-Europos, the climax of this gradual shift in power from French to Syrian authorities came in 1935, after initial negotiations between Yale and Seyrig led Rostovtzeff to believe that Yale would receive the synagogue and Syria would receive the Mithraeum.<sup>148</sup> In an unexpected turn of events, the Syrian senate reversed the decision and claimed the synagogue instead.<sup>149</sup> The Yale team was left with the Mithraeum, which led Rostovtzeff to write yet another irritated letter to Angell, lamenting that all his efforts "were futile" and that "political interests and intrigues are stronger than considerations of fairness, justice and scholarship."<sup>150</sup> Hopkins

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 49, 55.

<sup>146</sup> The British Museum acquired over 80 objects from Woolley's dig at Tell Atshana and over 1,700 from Max Mallowan's excavations. The Louvre likewise continues to hold thousands of artifacts from Schaeffer's dig at Ugarit. British Museum, "Explore the collection"; Louvre, "Collections."

<sup>147</sup> Gossman, *The Passion of Max von Oppenheim*, 147; National Museum of Denmark, "The Danish Expedition."

<sup>148</sup> Letter from Michael Rostovtzeff to James Angell, March 7, 1934, Box 94, Folder 954, Angell Papers.

<sup>149</sup> Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, 210.

<sup>150</sup> Letter from Michael Rostovtzeff to James Angell, January 9, 1935, Box 94, Folder 954, Angell Papers.

reported that Seyrig was likewise “chagrined and concerned” that the local government had begun to question the decisions of the French-led antiquities service.<sup>151</sup>



Figure 11: The synagogue of Dura-Europos as displayed at the National Museum of Damascus. The synagogue and its wall paintings remain one of the centerpiece’s of the museum’s collection. Late Antique Syria, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://lateantiquesyria.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/dura-west-wall-and-torah-niche.jpg>.

In addition to establishing a degree of autonomy and independence by retaining ancient artifacts, Syrian nationalists during the latter half of the French mandate began to rely more heavily on historical rhetoric to develop their visions of the Syrian nation. The main focus of many Syrian nationalists during the years of the French mandate was to attain independence while maintaining a status quo favoring the urban elite, and relying on ancient history proved a useful tool to advancing this aim.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, 211.

<sup>152</sup> Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 79-80.

This emphasis on Syrian nationalism became the foundation of several political parties and movements that emerged during the mandatory period.<sup>153</sup> One of the first to assemble was the People's Party, led by Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar, which eventually morphed into the National Bloc.<sup>154</sup> In many ways, however, the Bloc only represented a small, elite segment of Syrian society. Around ninety percent were Sunni Muslims, around eighty percent hailed from Damascus or Aleppo, most had received an education abroad and were in middle age, and almost all were the sons of landowners, wealthy merchants, or bureaucrats.<sup>155</sup> These men and their families had prospered economically and politically, first under the Ottomans and then under the French, and were therefore loath to enact policies that would drastically alter the status quo.<sup>156</sup>

This concept of the “nation” that these nationalists were promoting was still nebulous at the time and needed a foundation on which to rest. To uphold the status quo, this basis needed to allow for European influence, while at the same time minimizing its importance. Many of these early nationalists had attended secular schools and learned from the secular Young Turks movement, and so they looked to a foundation that emphasized secularism rather than Islam.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, the ideological underpinning of the movement needed to lend credence to Syria's new borders, both cutting out the rest of the Arab world and bringing together Syrians across ethnic and religious lines. Syria's ancient history — before the rise of Islam and featuring civilizations with both European and local roots — checked these boxes.

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<sup>153</sup> Under Syria's 1925 constitution, High Commissioner Maurice Sarrail allowed political parties to form. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 286.

<sup>154</sup> Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 79-80.

<sup>155</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 286, 291.

<sup>156</sup> Like in many of its colonies, the French for the most part left the privileges and resources of the local elite alone. Most landowners therefore kept their large estates and benefited financially from French reforms, such as improved communications. As Fieldhouse argues, these were “Syrian notables who were always ready to protect their social and political position while claiming to represent the interests of the ‘nation,’” resulting in what Dueck terms “the unstable boundaries between a colonial government and the local populations. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 291; Jennifer M. Dueck, *The Claims of Culture at Empire's End: Syria and Lebanon under French Rule* (Oxford: British Academy, 2010), 8.

<sup>157</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 6.



The main champion of this historical basis for Syrian nationalism was the young thinker Antun Sa'adeh.<sup>158</sup> Sa'adeh founded the Syrian Social Nationalist Party in 1932, and the French imprisoned him soon afterward.<sup>159</sup> He used ancient history as a model for relations between Syrians and Europeans and as a basis for national pride, although his particular view of history did not extend to politicizing archaeology. As an ardent believer in cosmopolitanism and international exchange, Sa'adeh's work examined both the good and the bad of exchange between Europe and the Levant in classical times. His telling of history "registered fully the violent expansion and ruthless imperial exploitation by Rome that prefigured modern imperialism," but it also recognized the material benefits of exchanges between Syrians, the Greeks, and the Romans.<sup>160</sup>

In his opinion, this cosmopolitan exchange resulted in a civilization more vibrant and accomplished than any people could achieve on their own. For example, he described how after the fall of the Carthage, the Mediterranean witnessed a struggle between the "Syrian Empire and the Roman Empire," and although "the Syrian Empire proved to be the strongest power in the Near East, its monarchical regime did nothing new towards the improvement of the art of governing," meaning that "the task of raising the standard of statecraft fell upon the shoulders of

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<sup>158</sup> Born in 1904 to a Lebanese Christian Orthodox family on Mount Lebanon, Sa'adeh (1904–1949) grew up surrounded by nationalist ideas, as his father was also a Syrian nationalist, journalist, and democrat. He spent significant time abroad in his teens and twenties years, including in Egypt, the United States, and Brazil. For more biographical information, see Haytham A. Kader, *The Syrian Social Nationalist Party: Its Ideology and Early History* (Beirut: Syrian Social Nationalist Party, 1990), 7.

<sup>159</sup> Sa'adeh's imprisonment had in part to do with the connections of the SSNP to fascist movements in Germany and Italy. Sa'adeh studied in Germany and observed German and Italian militias, and the SSNP logo even bears some resemblance to the swastika. Both French and Syrian sources accused the organization of fascist allegiances, and Sa'adeh referred to himself as the "Führer of the Syrian nation." Abdullah Kobersy, one of the party's founders, has said that the party sought support from Germany but did not subscribe to Nazi ideology. Sa'adeh was executed in 1949 by the Lebanese government for attempting to overthrow the government and create a "Greater Syria." See Dueck, *The Claims of Culture at Empire's End*, 138; Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism: Between Islam and the Nation-State* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 192-193; Beshara, *Antun Sa'adeh: The Man, His Thought: an Anthology*, 2.

<sup>160</sup> Dennis Walker, "Sa'adeh and the Recovery of Antiquity: The Evolution of Nations in Macro-History," in Adel Beshara (ed.), *Antun Sa'adeh: The Man, His Thought: an Anthology* (Reading: Garnet Publishing Ltd, 1999), 164-165.

Rome, which was competent to do it.”<sup>161</sup> Although a fervent Syrian nationalist, here Sa’adeh here almost echoed the imperial rhetoric of the French, who contended that their form of civilization was better suited to bring progress to Syria.

Using such examples, Sa’adeh positioned ancient history as “one key to define a nation and to understand and restructure its twentieth-century relations with Westerners.”<sup>162</sup> Like many other moderate Syrian nationalists, he did not want to expel French influence from Syria in its entirety, and he rejected the contemporary discourse — both from Syrians and from Westerners like Rostovtzeff — that treated ancient Syrian history as an unending battle between East and West.<sup>163</sup> Instead, he viewed ancient history as a model of successful cosmopolitanism and exchange that nationalists should emulate in post-independence Syria.

At the same time as he preached the benefits of cosmopolitanism, Sa’adeh also celebrated Syrian achievements. In particular, he emphasized the progress and expansion of the Phoenician empire, which stretched across swaths of modern-day Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Palestine. Phoenician civilization excited Sa’adeh not just because of its ethnic Syrian identity, but also because they managed to leave a distinct mark around the Mediterranean, from Tyre to Carthage to the Iberian peninsula.<sup>164</sup>

In developing his argument for the contributions of Syrian peoples to civilizational progress, Sa’adeh cited several historical figures and events. In particular, Sa’adeh admired the commercial spirit and success of the Phoenicians who, in his view, pioneered the system of the city-state and thereby provided an early model of the nation in which Phoenicians “refrained from fighting among themselves and maintained their states as one people linked together in

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<sup>161</sup> Antun Sa’adeh, *The Genesis of Nations* (Beirut: Department of Culture of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, 2004), 204.

<sup>162</sup> Walker, “Sa’adeh and the Recovery of Antiquity,” 163.

<sup>163</sup> Walker, “Sa’adeh and the Recovery of Antiquity,” 172.

<sup>164</sup> Sa’adeh, *The Genesis of Nations*, 136-137.

life.<sup>165</sup> He also celebrated Caracalla — a Roman emperor from the third century CE whose mother stemmed from an Arab priestly family from Emesa in Syria — who extended Roman citizenship to all free men of the empire through the Edict of Caracalla.<sup>166</sup> Through such examples, Sa'adeh mused that the Phoenicians “had distinctive cultural qualities and became a model copied by those nations which came within the sphere of Syrian civilization, such as the Greeks and the Romans.”<sup>167</sup> By looking back to this “Syrian civilization” and its influence on other societies, modern Syrians could both learn how to create a successful nation and feel pride in their shared past.

While he admired the Romans for their progress in civil rights and jurisprudence, Sa'adeh also expressed clear distaste for some of their methods and institutions. He enumerated several destructive Greek and Roman wars, lamenting that “the destruction by the Roman and Greek barbarians of the Phoenician capitals regrettably must have been devastating and complete.”<sup>168</sup> He further derided the Roman institution of slavery, which included many Syrian slaves. As a result, he lauded several of the slave revolts that exploded over the course of Roman history, especially that of the Syrian slave Eunus.<sup>169</sup> Like the French themselves, Sa'adeh saw a parallel between the French imperialists and the Roman empire before them, both in positive reforms they achieved and the brutality they enacted. Although he opposed violent overthrow of the mandatory government, his admiration for Syrian slave revolts against the Romans had clear contemporary significance.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Sa'adeh, *The Genesis of Nations*, 297.

<sup>166</sup> Maxime Rodinson, *The Arabs*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 55.

<sup>167</sup> Sa'adeh, *The Genesis of Nations*, 135.

<sup>168</sup> Walker, “Sa'adeh and the Recovery of Antiquity,” 174-175.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, 176.

In these parallels that he drew between ancient Syrians and Romans and their contemporary equivalents, Sa'adeh in some ways conceived of history in the same way as the French government and Western archaeologists. In other ways, however, his view of history diverged radically. Although he was proud of ancient Syrian achievements, Sa'adeh did not trace modern Syrians back to a single shared ancestor. He asked, "the Syrian nation, what single origin does it go back to? To the Canaanites (Phoenicians), who came as a stratum over the stratum of the Stone Age people or to the Amorites, or Hittites, or Aramaeans (Chaldeans)? Is not Syria a specific mixture or compound of these peoples, plus the Arabs after Islam and others?"<sup>171</sup>

Sa'adeh was therefore more interested in the contributions of different groups of people to cosmopolitan civilization as a whole, rather than in the greatness or uniqueness of any particular city or empire. As a result, his use of ancient history did not claim ownership over specific sites in the same way that the French did. It was the broader arcs of history — be it related to commerce, jurisprudence, or civil rights — that interested him, and by extension the SSNP, more than the buildings and artifacts that sites like Palmyra and Dura-Europos had to offer.

In addition to providing evidence for past Syrian achievements and rebellion against European imperial powers, ancient history gave some Syrian nationalists tools for advocating for one of their other goals: the "Greater Syria" ambition. According to Sa'adeh and the SSNP, Greater Syria, known in Arabic as *Bilad al-Sham*, encompassed the entire Fertile Crescent from the Taurus Mountains in modern-day Turkey to the Sinai and the Red Sea, including Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine.<sup>172</sup> For many Syrians, this focus on Bilad al-Sham was

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<sup>171</sup> Sa'adeh, *The Genesis of Nations*, 278.

<sup>172</sup> Christopher W. Jones, "Understanding ISIS's Destruction of Antiquities as a Rejection of Nationalism," *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology & Heritage Studies* 6, no. 1-2 (2018): 39-40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jeasmedarcherstu.6.1-2.0031>.

a rejection of Western-imposed borders, which in their opinion arbitrarily grouped together diverse regions and minority communities into the French mandate of Syria.<sup>173</sup>

The National Bloc wholeheartedly embraced the quest for Greater Syria. In 1928, the group's draft constitution proclaimed that "the Syrian territory separated from the Ottoman state constitutes a single indivisible unit and any arbitrary division that has occurred from the end of World War I [sic] is meaningless."<sup>174</sup> At their 1932 Congress in Homs, the Bloc established the formation of Greater Syria as their primary aim, although it conceded that Lebanon could decide its own borders.<sup>175</sup>

Even though the National Bloc mainly represented the interests of the urban elite, the rhetoric of the Great Syrian Revolt indicated that the broader Syrian population also stood behind the unity of Greater Syria. Rebel leaders often denounced the partition of the Ottoman province of Syria and called for its reunification as one of their primary goals.<sup>176</sup> Insurgent documents from the time of the rebellion extolled "a common rural Arab culture, centering on ideals of bravery, honor, and common historical memory."<sup>177</sup>

As much as the Greater Syria ambition was a rejection of French-imposed borders, it was also a repudiation of pan-Arabism. Syrian nationalists over the course of the mandate engaged in an internal struggle over whether to center a pan-Syrian or a pan-Arab identity. As Zisser put it, "pan-Syrianism implied a total commitment to Syrian identity ... while ignoring, negating or repressing the Arab and Islamic elements in this identity."<sup>178</sup> By embracing ancient history,

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<sup>173</sup> Eyal Zisser, "Who's Afraid of Syrian Nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 2 (2006): 183, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4284441>.

<sup>174</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 292.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism*, 22.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Zisser, "Who's Afraid of Syrian Nationalism?", 183.

pan-Syrian nationalists could sidestep the communal Arab and Islamic history of the region and dismiss it as less important than the pan-Syrian networks and civilizations of the pre-Islamic era.

While pan-Syrianism emphasized a shared Syrian identity based in the ancient past, the importance of Greater Syria on the nationalist agenda of groups like the National Bloc and the SSNP minimized their emphasis on archaeological sites in Syria proper. Within the pan-Syrian framework, Syrians could lay claim to civilizations from the Assyrians in the east to Phoenicians in the west. With these better-known and more influential civilizations available, there was less of a need to amplify and celebrate the accomplishments of more local populations, like those of Mari and Palmyra. As a result, even those Syrian nationalists who relied on the use of ancient history did not incorporate the importance of archaeology into their nationalist rhetoric.

### ***Pushback from Arab Nationalism***

Arab nationalists, meanwhile, rejected the use of ancient history in forging a shared identity altogether. Instead, they focused on the history that tied together the entire Arab world from the age of Muhammad onward. Whereas pan-Syrian nationalists looked back to the achievements of ancient civilizations like the Phoenicians and the Romans, Arab nationalists wanted to model their post-colonial world on the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates from the early days of Islam.<sup>179</sup> Focusing on the shared language and religion of the Arab world, prominent Arab nationalist and Ba'ath party founder Michel Aflaq declared, "Let the Arabs of today be Muhammad."<sup>180</sup>

Influenced by movements in nearby countries like Iraq and Egypt, pan-Arab nationalism gradually began to overtake pan-Syrian nationalism in centers like Damascus, Aleppo, and

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<sup>179</sup> Jones, "Understanding ISIS's Destruction of Antiquities as a Rejection of Nationalism," 32-33.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

Homs. This change coincided with the rise of the Syrian middle class, which began to challenge the traditional elite. Whereas the slightly older group of Syrian nationalists had often attended professional schools abroad and been exposed to European ideals, the formation of this new generation began primarily at home.<sup>181</sup> At schools called the *tajhiz*, “The history of the Arabs and their great contribution to the progress of world civilization were taught in the most exacting national terms. No glories or wonders of the Arab heritage were left unmentioned in the classroom.”<sup>182</sup>

Younger and more radical than the old guard, this new wave of nationalists wanted greater social and economic justice and pan-Arab unity, with a smaller emphasis on the constitutionalism and individual liberties that the National Bloc championed.<sup>183</sup> Whereas the legal achievements of the Assyrians under Hammurabi and Romans under the ethnically Syrian Caracalla provided the basis for the central tenets of the National Bloc, they were less relevant to the new goals of this new generation, who instead focused on the Arab achievements their education had emphasized. This more radical spirit resulted in the creation in 1933 of the League of National Action, which condemned the National Bloc for its accommodationist policies toward the French and called for action against the mandatory power “until full independence had been achieved and the ‘greater Arab state’ had been formed.”<sup>184</sup>

But Arab nationalism was not always synonymous with a rejection of ancient history and archaeology. In neighboring Iraq, for example, Arab nationalist leaders combined an emphasis on a pan-Arab past with claims of ownership over pre-Islamic civilizations and the sites that they

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<sup>181</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 6.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 411.

<sup>183</sup> Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 79-80; Dueck, *The Claims of Culture at Empire's End*, 61.

<sup>184</sup> Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 79-80.

left behind. The leader on this front was Sati al-Husri, a pan-Arab nationalist of Syrian descent who served as Director-General of Education under King Faisal in Iraq.<sup>185</sup>

Both Faisal and the British officials who led Iraq in the 1920s and 1930s struggled to find a common identity for Iraqis. As late as 1933, Faisal lamented that in “Iraq there is still no Iraqi people ... but unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic ideal, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie.”<sup>186</sup> To define a new Iraq across its many social, religious, and economic divides, Iraqi politicians turned to ancient history and archaeology while continuing to embrace a pan-Arab agenda.<sup>187</sup>

For the most part, Husri highlighted the common language and shared history of the Arab people.<sup>188</sup> While other Arab nationalists traced this pan-Arab identity no further back than the days of Muhammad and the ensuing Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, Husri traced Arab history into the pre-Islamic past. In doing so, he harnessed the German notion of the *volk*, which “stressed an early ancestor nation disseminating the hallmarks of civilization to others.”<sup>189</sup> For Germans, this ancestor nation were the early German tribes, whereas Husri pinpointed the Semitic peoples of the region, whom he called “pre-Islamic Arabs.”<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Sati al-Husri (1880–1968) first served as minister during King Faisal’s brief reign in Syria. When the French deposed Faisal, Husri joined him in his move to Baghdad, where he served as Director-General of Education and became known as the “Father of Iraqi Public Education.” ‘A Al-Hadid, ‘Le développement de l’éducation nationale en Iraq’, *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 2 (1932): 236; Abdi, “From Pan-Arabism to Saddam Hussein’s Cult of Personality,” 10.

<sup>186</sup> Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq’s Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba‘thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 25–26, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00859>.

<sup>187</sup> Ran Boytner, Lynn Swartz Dodd, and Bradley J. Parker, *Controlling the Past, Owning the Future: The Political Uses of Archaeology in the Middle East* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010).

<sup>188</sup> Although he traced the Arab “*volk*” back to pre-Islamic times, Husri did not believe in the importance of ancient languages like Latin and Greek. In a debate with Nobel prize nominee Taha Husayn, Husri argued against the teaching of Latin and Greek in Iraqi schools, instead declaring that Arab students should learn Arabic. Dueck, *The Claims of Culture at Empire’s End*, 30–31.

<sup>189</sup> Abdi, “From Pan-Arabism to Saddam Hussein’s Cult of Personality,” 10–11.

<sup>190</sup> R. S. Simon, “The Imposition of Nationalism on a Non-Nation State; The Case of Iraq During the Interwar Period, 1921–1941,” in I. Gershoni & J. Jankowski (eds), *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 89.



As Director-General of Education, Husri considered his main duty ensuring that the next generation of Iraqi leaders would have his same vision of Iraq's past and its future path.<sup>191</sup>

According to Dawisha, "Husri sought to inculcate into the people, especially the young, a clear and durable sense of Arab national identity that would supercede other prevalent identities, such as tribalism, regionalism, and sectarianism."<sup>192</sup>

In 1932, Husri brought the same pan-Arab fervor to his new post as Director of the Department of Antiquities. He decried the massive export of antiquities that had occurred under the Antiquities Law composed by British archaeologist Gertrude Bell during the years of the British Mandate, and the department soon enacted a new Antiquities Law.<sup>193</sup> The revised law imposed many more restrictions on foreign-led excavations and especially on the export of artifacts, leading many Western archaeologists — like Mallowan, as mentioned earlier — to move their work to Syria, where the French had much less stringent export ordinances.<sup>194</sup> With such restrictions on foreign expeditions, the Iraqi government began encouraging Iraqi-led digs. Although most of these digs uncovered Islamic-era sites like Samarra and Wasit, the antiquities department under Husri also excavated pre-Islamic sites like the Sumerian city Eridu and the Hassuna site, Tell Hassuna.<sup>195</sup>

This emphasis on Iraqi-led archaeology shows a clear contrast with the strategies of Syrian nationalists like Sa'adeh. Husri found a way to marry his pan-Arab ideology and a national interest in ancient history, which led the Iraqi government to center historical and archaeological education and to fight back against extractive antiquities laws in a way that Syrian nationalists did not attempt to the same extent.

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<sup>191</sup> William L. Cleveland, *The Making of an Arab Nationalist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 147, [muse.jhu.edu/book/38455](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/38455).

<sup>192</sup> Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 50.

<sup>193</sup> Abdi, "From Pan-Arabism to Saddam Hussein's Cult of Personality," 15.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, 16.

This unified ideology and action contrasted with the ongoing debate and confusion in Syrian society over their national relationship with antiquity. Was it something to be celebrated and learned from, as Sa'adeh argued? Something to be passed over in favor of Islamic history, as Arab nationalists contended? Did the workers who lived and worked at excavations feel ownership over their digs, or did they see it as just another European folly? Without a coherent vision across the country, nationalist and local efforts to reclaim archaeology as a practice made less headway than in Iraq.

## **Conclusion**

Funds and finds at Dura-Europos began to dry up after 1935, and the Yale team finally packed their bags and headed home in 1937.<sup>196</sup> As the boat pulled out of Beirut, they left behind a country much changed from when they had first arrived almost a decade earlier. As Syria emerged from centuries of Ottoman rule, the fierce battle between French authorities and Syrian nationalists over the country's future hinged on their differing perceptions of the Syrian past. On the one hand, French efforts to claim the Syrian past manifested in physical form through archaeology, which the French mandate used to better control desert space, to profit from the colonial project, and to legitimize the French civilizing mission.

Within the ranks of local nationalist movements, opinions split over how to present and claim the past. Syrian nationalists like Antun Sa'adeh used ancient history as a method to unite the Greater Syrian nation and celebrate the country's cosmopolitan future, while Arab nationalists minimized the importance of the ancient past and instead prioritized the Islamic era. Both sides of the nationalist movement tended to deemphasize the importance of archaeology, although Syrian government officials began to claim control over the export of antiquities.

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<sup>196</sup> Baird, *Dura-Europos*, 14.

Meanwhile, while the methods of French authorities and Western archaeologists alienated many Syrians who came to identify ancient Syria as the realm of the West, the rhetoric of the Great Syrian Revolt and local labor at excavation sites nevertheless served to engage rural communities more with ancient history.

The French mandate gave way to the Republic of Syria in 1945, and the final French troops departed in 1946.<sup>197</sup> Independence for the most part brought an end to the Greater Syria ambition as neighboring countries became their own republics, but it also gave Syrians control over national archaeology for the first time. A new generation of Syrian archaeologists came to control historical discourse in the country, and the Ba'athist regime that has controlled Syria since the 1960s has centered Syria's pre-Islamic history in its nation-building project.<sup>198</sup> Nevertheless, the legacies of Western archaeology in Syria remained for decades, as many excavations led and funded by Western institutions continued to perpetuate the divide between Western "archaeologists" and local "workers" laboring under often-exploitative conditions.<sup>199</sup>

The appropriation of ancient sites by French imperialists, Western archaeologists, and the Ba'athist regime ultimately contributed to their destruction. Between 2011 and 2015, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria looted or razed many archaeological treasures in Syria, including the famous Temple of Bel in Palmyra and most of Dura-Europos.<sup>200</sup> There were many reasons for such cultural destruction, including the lucrative nature of selling antiquities and the pre-Islamic history of the sites. But most importantly, this demolition was a reaction to the relation between archaeology and the series of exploitative regimes that have controlled Syria since the First World War. As De Cesari argues, "[a]rchaeological sites in the Levant are imbued with the

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<sup>197</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, xv.

<sup>198</sup> Valter, *La construction nationale syrienne*.

<sup>199</sup> Chiara De Cesari, "Post-Colonial Ruins: Archaeologies of Political Violence and IS," *Anthropology Today* 31, no. 6 (2015): 25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44082423>.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 22.

presence of colonialism and its persisting legacy in the oppressive nationalisms that followed: they are a sign of the ultimate failure of the emancipatory project of the post-colonial nation-state.”<sup>201</sup>

In response to the destruction, the mandate-era debate over patrimony, sovereignty, and ownership reemerged. Many Western newspapers published articles condemning the acts of violence as a loss to global cultural heritage, while Syrian artists created art inspired by the influence of Palmyra on Syrian society.<sup>202</sup> Once the Assad regime retook Palmyra from ISIS, it held a patriotic concert among the ruins marred by bullet holes, with military marches blaring and attendees waving Syrian flags.<sup>203</sup> More than a century later after British troops first laid eyes on the art of Dura-Europos, the competing visions of Syrian antiquity first seeded in the tumultuous years of the French mandate — from imperial tool to nationalist trophy — persist.

**Word Count:** 12,451

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>202</sup> See for example, Jason Farago, “The Ancient Syrian City ISIS Is Destroying, Preserved Online,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/arts/design/palmyra-syria-isis.html> and Omer Koparan, Esref Musa and Ethem Emre Ozcan, “Syrian Uses Art to Keep Ancient City of Palmyra Alive,” *Anadolu Agency*, March 29, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/life/syrian-uses-art-to-keep-ancient-city-of-palmyra-alive/2191473>.

<sup>203</sup> The Arab Weekly, “Syria Regime Holds Patriotic Concert in Ancient City of Palmyra,” May 1, 2016, <https://the arabweekly.com/syria-regime-holds-patriotic-concert-ancient-city-palmyra>.

### *Bibliographical Essay*

During a study abroad program in Morocco after my first year of college, our group went on an excursion to the well-preserved ancient Roman ruins of Volubilis near the city of Meknès. I had studied Latin all throughout high school and had loved reading about Greek and Roman history ever since I was little, and so I was excited at the prospect of visiting such a site. But even though it was a beautiful, sunny Saturday in June, we were practically the only ones there. Used to the crowds that fill Roman ruins in Europe to the brim, I was a bit taken aback by the emptiness. Even accounting for lower levels of domestic tourism in Morocco compared to European countries, the lack of local visitors was striking.

In a class on the Roman Empire that I took the next spring, I therefore decided to write a final paper on Roman sites like Volubilis in Morocco and what they mean to Moroccans today. I found that French protectorate had harnessed the region's ancient Roman history for its imperialist rhetoric, using Roman ruins to link their history to Morocco's and thereby defend their civilizing mission. As a result, many Moroccans nowadays feel disconnected from the country's ancient history, linking it to Europe instead of to themselves.

This research sparked my interest in debates over cultural heritage and restoration, leading me to write a paper for another class on the politics of restoration for ancient Iraqi sites that ISIS destroyed a few years ago. Instead of focusing on European rhetoric, this paper explored how Arab nationalists like Saddam Hussein employed ancient imagery to bolster their political claims, using longgone empires to bring together Iraqis across religious and ethnic lines. In my senior essay, I hoped to bring these two sides — European imperialist and Arab nationalist — into conversation with each other as they debated their ownership of archaeological sites.

To begin with, I chose to focus on both ancient Mesopotamian history in mandate-era Iraq and ancient Roman history in mandate-era Syria so that I could contrast how differing colonial regimes and civilizations affected how political actors harness history. Soon, however, I realized that this left me with significantly too much ground to cover. Instead of exploring the political use of ancient history in general, I decided to home in on the politicization of archaeological sites in particular. Moreover, although there is a much more expansive secondary literature on the mandate period in Iraq, I chose to zoom in on just Syria, focusing above all on the Yale dig at Dura-Europos.

Unfortunately, the COVID pandemic got in the way of my vague plans to visit several archives in Jordan that house periodicals, textbooks, and other primary sources from Levantine countries in the 1920s and 1930s. But luckily for this project, the Yale Manuscripts and Archives and the Yale University Art Gallery hold the papers of several of the archaeologists involved at Dura-Europos. Above all, I made use of the Michael Ivanovitch Rostovtzeff papers and the Clark Hopkins papers, as well as those of Yale University President James Angell, Classics department chair George Lincoln Hendrickson, and the Yale University Art Gallery. The main limitation of these sources is that their authors are American academics rather than French politicians or administrators, but the Hendrickson papers provided correspondence showing the tight French control over the American-led digs, which sparked both admiration and frustration from the Yale professors.

Although these papers were more scant on the details of day-to-day excavation than I had anticipated, they were much more explicit in their justification of the French presence than expected. The sources' passing mentions of local workers at the digs prompted me to look

beyond the viewpoints of the urban elite in Damascus and try to tease out the experiences of rural, nomadic, or lower-class Syrians in relation to archaeology at the time.

On the side of the Arab and Syrian nationalists, I have mainly relied on political treatises from leading Syrian intellectuals at the time, including Sati al-Husri and, above all, Antun Sa'adeh. These writings helped clarify the distinctions between Arab, Greater Syrian, and Syrian forms of nationalism that divided the Damascene political circles during the mandate period. Perhaps my greatest challenge in identifying primary sources — besides the difficulty of deciphering Arabic, French, and questionable penmanship — was finding the voices of Syrians who fell outside Syria's bourgeois class. Rather than having distinct primary sources reflecting these voices, these perspectives instead come in bits and pieces quoted in a variety of secondary sources and from the accounts of Western archaeologists like Agatha Christie.

Beyond the available primary sources, several of the secondary sources I came across in my research have profoundly shaped my thinking on the topic. Firstly, several works helped place the three sets of Yale archaeological papers into context. For example, the paper "Photographing Dura-Europos, 1928–1937: An Archaeology of the Archive" and the book *Dura-Europos* — both by Jennifer Baird — provided key insights into how Western archaeologists thought about contemporary Syrians through an allochronic lens. More importantly, the article used photographs from the Dura-Europos expedition as its primary analytical target, which prompted me to push myself to think outside of the realm of written sources alone and take a closer look at some of the photographs found in the Yale collections. Another valuable source was Daniel Neep's *Occupying Syria Under the French Mandate*, which details the often brutal military tactics that the French used and explains French concepts of control, space, and nation-building. Both of these texts were vital in allowing me to make the

jump from the facts presented in the primary sources to the more abstract concepts that they represented.

On the topic of Syrian nationalism, the most authoritative among the secondary sources was Philip Khoury. His definitive work on the history of Syrian nationalism helped bring nuance to my thinking on the subject by outlining the ways in which Syrian elites wanted to both upend and uphold the status quo with their brand of nationalist ideology. The volume *Antun Sa'adeh: The Man, His Thought: An Anthology*, edited by Adel Beshara, also proved useful in putting various aspects of Antun Sa'adeh's historical thinking into context, with each chapter analyzing a different facet of his worldview. In addition, Idir Ouahes' volume, *Syria and Lebanon Under the French Mandate: Cultural Imperialism and the Workings of Empire*, was key to understanding how the local Syrian government began to resist the French antiquities service. Altogether, the secondary literature has pinpointed several additional facets related to my question, leading me to place greater emphasis on concepts like violence, space, resistance, and class in my writing.

Although these sources were all valuable in their own ways, the literature on the subject as a whole has a few gaps, especially since Syria lies in an understudied part of the world. Secondary sources in the field tend to focus on either the French or the Syrian side, with little comparison and direct conversation between the two. Works also tend to use the mandate period as an introduction to later Syrian history under the Ba'ath party and the Assad regime, and so the details for the mandate period are often less precise and more perfunctory. Finally, French-language scholarship — and especially Arabic-language work — was often harder to both find and access.

At the beginning, undertaking such a project during a pandemic was daunting. I had for years hoped to conduct international archival research as part of a senior essay on the Middle



East, but I instead had to adapt both my topic and my methods to work closer to home.

Nevertheless, the primary and secondary sources cited have come together to form what I hope is a nuanced and accurate portrait of politics and archaeology in mandate-era Syria.

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